BOOK 9

SRI KRISHNA

1

I knew that war would never be the final solution War doesn't resolve conflicts, war doesn't solve problems In fact, war's bloody massacres generate a terrible fear that mankind may lose all sense of humanity The danger is that society may collapse altogether The cultural foundations of a country are imperilled The fear is that the enchanting dreams that mankind has cherished generation after generation will shatter When we are seeking life's central purpose our minds can get overpowered by black doubts and confusions And yet I had gone ahead and ignited this great war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas I had started a massive *yajna* that would consume lakhs and lakhs of soldiers I had begun a mind-blowing game that would unleash the venom dormant in every person I had sparked off a horrendous confrontation and clash of the particles that energise the universe Why? Because I was some sort of stone-hearted murderer? Did I desire the destruction of all living creatures in the world? Did I want the whole of Aryavarta to be shrouded with cruelty, disrespect, anarchy, and selfishness? Certainly not

I lit the fire of the war, I was the one who exhorted back to battle dry-throated Arjuna when, paralysed by compassion for his relatives, he flung aside his Gandiva bow I took the reins of his Nandighosha chariot in order to guide his horses On the third day of the war I violated my promise not to wield arms in battle, but that did not worry me Why did I do all this? What was my motive? Only to punish Duryodhana and Duhshasana for so grossly insulting pure-charactered Draupadi? To uproot once and for all the wicked political intrigues of Uncle Shakuni? To expose the sweet but ineffective "non-alignment" of Bhishma and Drona? To apply the glossy collyrium of truth in the unseeing eyes of Dhritarashtra? To show the path to heaven to misguided, lost and perpetually confused Karna? No This would have been easy enough I would have made special efforts to achieve special results Nor was it a question of establishing two separate kingdoms

The problem facing me was simple—it concerned all mankind The problem was one of ultimate and eternal truth The problem concerned the immortal souls of all manner of life, the entire multitudinosity of creation

The one never-changing and ultimate truth of life is immortal, radiant consciousness, which you can never experience by cooping yourself up in the voluptuous dissipations of palace-pleasures By clinging to impure attachments, like a crocodile clutching at an elephant in a river, one never tastes that consciousness For that, every vein in our body must deeply and unequivocally realise that, just as night succeeds day, death inevitably succeeds life The heart, the mind, the body—all must become conscious of the soul Then there is no need for any other person to tell us what is the truth, and to prove it Truth then emanates from every body by itself Salvation and supreme enlightenment are not obtained by going around with a begging bowl You don't quench your hunger by watching another eat You don't slake your thirst by watching another drink Similarly, just advice from another is not going to bring about one's own salvation Wherever there is life—that's where the Soul is—and that's where the Soul struggles for salvation You cannot see this from the outside, but this is what's happening all the time The meaning of life is self-manifestation

Occasionally, mankind faces the prospect of annihilation of all manifestation This happens when mankind, violating scriptures, moral advice, and basic social norms, drowns itself in self-indulgence This happens when it does not have time to see that beyond the world of the sense is another subtle level of experience Then mankind has to mark time, and nothing then seems to work except war That was the only reason I lit the fire of war

2

Ten days had passed The horrors of the carnage kept increasing The din was terrifying I saw all this as I held the reins in the Nandighosha chariot of my life-precious disciple Arjuna and manoeuvred the pure-white horses through the four-fold army divisions I had joined the Pandavas as their charioteer in order to help them, and as I observed the massacre going on in Kurukshetra I was sure that the Pandavas were going to win Because because to the Pandavas, including Arjuna, Karna, the son of the

Sun-God, was an infinitely heroic, Kala-like bringer of doom like Death himself, and he was not going to enter the battle until Bhishma fell. There was no leader in the Kaurava ranks to equal Karna, who had purified himself by continuous sadhana, who was eminently efficient, and who radiated heroic splendour. So out of the goodness of my heart I went to Hastinapura and, explaining his divine birth to him, I did all I could to win him over to the side of the Pandavas. But even I, who wield the Sudarshana chakra, failed to swerve that ocean-powerful will of his. While returning from Hastinapura, I wondered if my speaking the truth would in any way dent his determination. But no, that was impossible. For he had proved in his life that only that person breaks who has no lustre, no magnificence. In fact, his reaction when he realised that he was the Sun-God's son astonished everyone. Vidura informed me that, after his meeting with me, Karna returned shouting "I am the Sun-God's son! I am the Sun-God's son!" and, embracing five golden water pitchers, he overturned them. That same Karna had vowed not to set foot on the battleground until Bhishma fell. Indra had very cleverly deprived Karna of his skin-armour and flesh-ear-rings for the sake of his son Arjuna. Parashurama had cast a nerve-shattering curse on him: "The Brahma-missile will fail you at the critical time in battle." The Brahmin's ejaculation on Mahendra hill, "The earth will drag your chariot wheel down in battle exactly like this," was not something anyone could forget. He had given Kunti Devi his word that he would not harm four of her sons. Though he was the Sun-God's son, the first Pandava Karna's role in battle was the same as mine: we were both chariot-drivers.

But was this the whole truth?

The eleventh day of battle dawned. Flying the triangular royal flag of the Kauravas, Guru Drona, leader of the Kaurava hosts, faced me grimly on the field. Drona! Drona was truly a master of all weapons and war-skills. Seeing Bhishma fall on the tenth day of battle, the decimated Kaurava soldiers lost heart but, seeing Drona installed as their new Commander-in-Chief, they re-grouped with fresh enthusiasm and raised vociferous war-cries. The surroundings of Kurukshetra rang with their resurgent sky-rending shouts.

Today was the first time Karna, under the command of Drona, entered the field at the head of a huge chariot-force. He stood in his Jaitra chariot which was decked with creepers and tendrils and

ornamented with glittering gold-work, and his impressive tall figure made him stand out like Mount Kailasa in the Himalayas His ochre war-flag fluttered on his chariot pole linked fast by elephant-chains, it flapped with such intensity that the golden pole swayed with it And Karna, encased completely in armour, looked like a flaming, ash-covered ember He was bereft of skin-armour and flesh-ear-rings, there was a curse on his head, but he could burn like fire A fiery spark, no matter how small, is still a fiery spark I knew only too well that it would be foolhardy to confront Arjuna with a fresh and energetic Karna In fact, in the meeting inside the tent last night, Yudhishthira had asked repeatedly, fearfully, "What about that son of Radha, that charioteer's offspring?' and I had explained that if Karna, who had endured so much agony all his life and whose honour had been so bitterly insulted, were to meet Arjuna on the field, he would pulverise Arjuna with the ease of a whirlwind reducing a thatched hut to shreds in seconds Only one person could check him—and that was mountainous Bhima That was why we unanimously decided to pit Bhima against Karna at the outset No matter how wrathful, word-honouring Karna would never forget the promise he had made to Kunti Devi He would not kill Bhima He would not fatally attack anyone except Arjuna Now the valiant one was no better than a fangless snake or a clawless lion

During the period that Bhishma was Commander-in-Chief, the chariot duels, the stone-hurling and other encounters were so fierce that 500,000 Pandava-warriors perished Bhima, Shveta, Satyaki, Arjuna, Dhrishtadyumna and Yuyudhana despatched 1,000,000 Kaurava warriors to the abode of Yama Still the Kaurava army exceeded the Pandava With Karna and Drona as leaders the Kauravas numbered an endlessly surging oceanic force of 1,500,000 We had 1,000,000 soldiers arrayed behind the Nandi-ghosha chariot

As the day dawned, Karna placed his heavy, magnificent, shoulder-high, golden, variously-decorated Vijaya bow in his chariot, then, lifting it high, he waved it in front of his army His red veins, as thick as horses' reins, swelled as he picked up his huge, white conch Hiranyagarbha and blew into it loudly The sky-piercing reverberations of that conch excelled all others It was as if he was announcing before his thousand-rayed father, the Sun-God, "Like your arrowy rays annihilating the darkness, my deadly

naracha, snake-tongued, gold-feathered, needle-sharp, vicious, elephant-heavy, conch-shaped, *chandrapatti*, *grighapatra* and other arrows will wipe out Arjuna today I will see that the elephant symbol on my war-flag tramples the monkey on his!' Blowing again on his Hiranyagarbha conch a peal that made the soldiers horripilate, he urged his massive chariot-force forward His light blue eyes turned dark blue in anger Forgetting that Drona was the Commander-in-Chief the maha chariot-heroes behind him sent up incessant shouts of "Victory! Victory! Victory!" Seeing the first-born Pandava like the Nishadha mountain ringed with submarine flames, not just every Pandava soldier but I as well wondered if the Sun himself had taken another form and appeared among us on his swift, white-horsed chariot Like the ocean roaring on the full-moon night of Purnamasi, he roared, lifting his bow In a flash he had penetrated the ranks of the Pandavas, with the ease of a crocodile slicing through river waters His angry eyes were searching solely for Arjuna's banner But Bhima covered Arjuna every time, and presented himself before Karna Skilfully I manoeuvred Arjuna's Nandighosha chariot away from Karna and halted it in front of Drona

The two faced each other—the hero who single-chariot sub dued all Aryavarta in his world-conquering mission, the first-born son of Kunti whose complexion shone with a holy lustre gained through charity, *tapasya*, fortitude, and inner purity, and puissant Bhima who had killed such huge-bodied adversaries as Bakasura, Hidimba, and Jarasandha They sized each other up briefly before pouncing like two maddened wild elephants And the blood-curdling duel began Arrow clashed against arrow Breathing heavily like two roused snakes, they soon shrouded the sky with thick arrowy showers Descending like endless torrential rains from the Mriga constellation, Karna's arrows sped from his bow and harassed the allies of Bhima, among them Virata, Matsya and Panchala Like the afternoon sun oppressing the desert sands, Karna's flaming arrows consumed the Pandava forces So infuriated was arrow-harassed Bhima that he downed pitcher after pitcher of wine in an attempt to inject passion in every drop of his blood Rolling his eyes, which were flaming crimson like the *gunja*-flower, he attacked Karna with such ferocity that he sliced the string of Karna's Vijaya bow eight times in quick succession Five times he unchariot Karna, wounding Karna's charioteer

Satyasena As soon as Satyasena toppled from the chariot, Karna flung away his bow Cradling Satyasena's trembling head in his lap, he tried reviving him by calling out "Satyasena! Satyasena!" In the meantime Bhima leapt from his chariot into Karna's and pulverised it Satyasena was incapacitated, but Karna continued to battle with complete composure, keeping in mind the word he had given his mother and adopting only a defensive posture against Bhima But Karna could not control himself when the influence of the wine transformed Bhima into a raging ocean storm His blue eyes turned red with anger He scorched whatever came in front of him, like the blistering heat of the sun in month of Vaishakha, and rained deadly arrows upon Bhima with such incessant speed that Bhima was obscured in no time, like thick fog suddenly darkening the Ganga With needle-arrows sticking all over his body, Bhima fell from his chariot with a thud, like a giant sal-tree toppled by a storm The earth shuddered Bhima, son of the wind-god Vayu, lay unconscious Unbeaten Bhima, who even in sleep never showed his back to the earth, sprawled now on his earth-bed

Sparks of victory-joy flashing from his eyes, Karna leapt from his chariot and sprinted towards the inert form of Bhima None had power to stop him

Quickly Bhima recovered consciousness, and, blinking his blood shot eyes, tried to rise Using his bow-string as a noose, round Bhima's neck, Karna jerked hard, the same Karna whom he had in the tournament insulted as "Son of a charioteer" now mocked him, shouting, '*Arre*, you speaker of gibberish! Shall I flay your proud back with my whip? Go! Run from my sight! Go to a kitchen where there's heaps of food, and put your lapping tongue to good use there! And never again dare to face Karna! Go! Go!'

Humiliated, head bowed, Bhima left, granted life by large-hearted Karna This was the first ever blow to Bhima's pride

It was with great difficulty that the corpses of Duryodhana's brothers, Durmukha, Durjaya, Vikarna, all slain by Bhima, were removed by the Kauravas from the battlefield As he was on the point of killing Vikarna, the scene of Draupadi's disrobing after the gambling match swam before Bhima s eyes Alighting from his chariot, he removed his crown and paid homage to Vikarna's lifeless body Harassed by Karna's remarkable feats, Yudhishthira was ready to start negotiations to end the war The eleventh day

dawned with the humbling of Bhima's self-importance. There was no sleep for Yudhishthira as he lay in his tent On the twelfth day, master-of-strategies Drona arranged his force in the Conch Formation and, rallying his soldiers, at the very start of battle, sent Chekitana, Dridhasena, Purujit, Yugandhara, Dhvajaketu, Viraketu, Vrika, Shankha, Manuman, Suchitra, Anshuman, and the mighty Raja Drupada to the realm of Yama But because he loved Arjuna, the guru battled only half-heartedly with his disciple His zeal was flagging When all's said, love is often a frail feeling

Arjuna succeeded in uncharioting Achala, Ugramanyu, Dirghayu, Vashta, Saushruti and other famous chariot-heroes Satyaki pursued Ashvatthaman, Duhshasana and Shakuni When two massive boulders collide, countless colonies of ants and insects crawling on them get crushed, similarly, innumerable soldiers from each of the four-fold army divisions perished on the field Trampled by elephants, horses and chariots in the bedlam of battle, they died, so many, screaming in agony Chopped off elephants' trunks, human hands, feet and crowned heads heaped the field

Karna roamed the field like a roused, angry lion, looking for Arjuna among the four-fold divisions But I was holding the reins of Arjuna's chariot Always keeping an eye on Karna's war-flag with its strongly-fettered pole, I cleverly swerved Arjuna's chariot in the opposite direction Anyone could see, from the way he had spared Bhima's life, how lethal his war-skill was Frustrated because he could not locate Arjuna, Karna let loose his wrath on Yudhishthira, Nakula and Sahadeva, repeatedly uncharioting them, repeatedly throwing his bow around their necks, his eyes shooting fire, he asked them in desperation, "Tell me, tell me, where is that blue skinned snake who stung my Sudamana and Shon?" The chariotless Pandavas, embarrassed, swallowing their humiliation, slunk away without saying a word Bound by his word to the Queen Mother Kunti Devi, the son of the Sun-God, breathing heavily, began persecuting the armies of Panchala, Virata, Matsya, Rakshasa and others, mowing them down like on a reaper's sickle at harvest-time Slicing them at will, he flashed across the field like a streak of lightning On one occasion he made Yudhishthira unconscious and hurled his chariot far across the field The soldiers carried Yudhishthira away and revived him

Karna burst on all like a cataclysmic explosion from a sixty-year-old pent-up volcano He was a roaring mass of destruction Nothing could withstand him And so the twelfth day passed So choked with corpses was the field that a new site of battle had to be chosen daily

Seeing that no Pandava had perished yet, that night Duryodhana put aside all regard for protocol and courtesy, and berated Commander-in-Chief Drona, "Twelve days have passed, and twelve lakhs of our soldiers have died, but not a single Pandava! Bhima has slaughtered twentyfour of my brothers, but not one Pandava has perished Is this a war, or a feast-offering before a world-conquering army? Gurudeva Drona, if for any reason your bow is unable to kill the Pandavas, be so good as to transfer the war-flag to the chariot of Karna from tomorrow " Each word stabbed Drona's heart Not a single one of the Kauravas and Pandavas whom he had so diligently trained in the use of war-weapons was concerned with his feelings Pitiless Kala, the World Time-Spirit, had proved that Guru Drona had only one true disciple—dark-skinned but white-souled Ekalavya of the Nishadha mountain tribe, dressed in tree-bark, who had cut off his thumb and offered it to Drona Dedication and sacrifice are always superior to social conformism

Stuffing everyone's love for him in the vast hollow of his quiver, Guru Drona stood up, determined His white beard shook

"I make this promise to Duryodhana who has cast doubts on my ability—tomorrow's sun will not set without witnessing the death of one illustrious Pandava or other in the Chakravyuha battle-formation," saying this he stalked out of the meeting

3

Our spy reported to us exactly what happened at that assembly Arjuna and the others were deeply upset Chakravyuha! The most intricate of all battle-formations! Who should be appointed Commander-in-Chief for tomorrow? Who was capable of piercing the Chakravyuha? Silently I listened for a while to what the troubled Pandavas said All were in favour of giving the command to Bhima Bhima was a brilliant warrior but by no means the type to slice through the Chakravyuha I sent an attendant to summon Abhimanyu As soon as he entered, I exclaimed, "Abhi!"

Arjuna's son knew immediately from my affectionately addressing him as "Abhi" and not "Abhimanyu" that I had something special to tell him Below his sharp nose, through his long lips, flashed the meteor-like smile of white teeth He stepped forward, offered me the usual respect, and said softly, "Yes, uncle? '

Seeing his gentleness and his mature conduct, sure signs of the blood of the Yadavas and the Pandavas, indecision overcame me—for this was the sixteen-year old youth, hardly one year married, whom we were going to pawn in tomorrow s battle I did not know what to say

Seeing all silent, he said, "Why are you silent? So troubled?"

"Guru Drona is ordering the impregnable Chakravyuha formation tomorrow To pierce that—"

I was unable to speak frankly to him I could not put aside the sweet face of his pregnant wife Uttara which kept floating in front of my eyes

"If that is my responsibility, I shall consider it an honour I accept it gladly, with the blessings of all present " Offering his respects to all, not wishing to show discourtesy to elders and superiors by sitting in their midst, Subhadra's son Abhimanyu walked out of the tent with the stately gait of a horse returning from a bath in the Yamuna's waters There was a lump in everyone's throat There was no other warrior so young on the battle field The fourteenth day of the dark fortnight dawned—the thirteenth day of battle No sooner had the sun risen than Guru Drona, emerging from his tent ordered his troops to form the Circular Labyrinth of the Chakravyuha in the hazy light He positioned himself at the head—like a lion at the entrance of a cave

Looking like a second Arjuna, Abhimanyu announced his assumption of leadership by blowing loudly on his conch The army marched, with Bhima, Nakula, Sahadeva and Yuyudhana assigned to protect Abhimanyu

Slowly, steadily, as if peeling a *kandarpa*, one by one Abhimanyu's ranks sliced their way into the Kaurava array Wounding Drona, Shakuni, Duhshasana, Kritavarman, Kripa, Ashvatthaman, Duryodhana and others, he shattered rank upon rank of the Kaurava forces He slithered inside the Kaurava formation like a snake gliding inside a hole Bhima trailed close behind, but the distance between him and Abhimanyu kept

widening Nimble-armed, brimming-with-zeal, forgetting-his-own-safety Abhimanyu did not so much as once look back, his sole aim was to shoot into the heart of the Chakravyuha with the swiftness of an arrow Killing thousands of chariot-heroes, elephant-warriors, horse-riders and others, he succeeded single-handed in cutting his way through seven defence-formations, and found himself in the centre of the eighth Surrounding him, on all sides, stood lakhs and lakhs of Kaurava soldiers Fighting singly, undaunted, he unchariоted Shatrunjaya, Takshaka, Satyashravas, Chandraketu, Jayatsena, and other cloud-swift chariot-heroes It was getting to be evening, and because Abhimanyu showed no sign of retreating the battle flared up fiercely Such carnage was never witnessed in the last twelve days Six maha-chariot-heroes—Drona, Kripa, Kritavarman, Ashvatthaman, Brihadbala and Karna—launched a concerted attack on Abhimanyu, isolated in the centre of the Chakravyuha Yes, Karna was among them His lifelong resentment could take him to any lengths But Abhimanyu refused to surrender At the end there was a terrible mace duel between Duryodhana's son Lakshmana and Abhimanyu, so fierce that both were knocked senseless as they hit each other simultaneously Lakshmana recovered first, without a second thought he smashed his mace on the head of unconscious Abhimanyu The blood-red, lotus-like face of Abhimanyu became a pulpy mass Before dying, he uttered plaintively, "Uncle Bhi-ma! Uncle Bhi-ma! " Hearing him, even the hardest-hearted soldier melted Only Jayadratha, however, haughtily stepped forward and, to see if the inert Abhimanyu, who lay face down on the ground, was really dead, kicked at the corpse The mutilated face was embedded in the ground by the force of Lakshmana's blow, only the trunk of the corpse turned over Abhimanyu, valiant son of Arjuna, not wanting any Kaurava soldier to see his radiant lotus visage, hid his face in the supremely hospitable earth His corpse sprawled askew in the dead centre of the Chakravyuha

As soon as Arjuna heard of Jayadratha's savage deed, he rolled his large eyes and, lifting his Gandiva-bow, vowed, "Before sunset tomorrow I will despatch to the realm of Yama the man who dared to kick the body of my loved son, if I fail to do this, I will enter fire and reach heaven where I will offer my son paternal affection "

The thirteenth sunset arrived with Arjuna weeping as he did *pradakshina* around the corpse of Abhimanyu Thirteen areas of

Kurukshetra had become horrendous battling grounds in those thirteen days. The field was a veritable charnel-house.

That night I saw to it that no one entered my tent; instead, I summoned an astrologer. He wrote out figures on birch-bark, and started calculating on his fingers. It was midnight when he raised his head. Adjusting his head-gear, he said, "Tomorrow is the total solar eclipse of the dark fortnight. Yes, Raja of the Yadavas! In the afternoon." I removed my pearl necklace and, throwing it to him, asked him to return to Hastinapura. He vanished in the thick darkness outside.

The fourteenth day of the war dawned. Till the afternoon I kept manoeuvring Arjuna's Nandighosha chariot amongst the Kaurava columns, but failed to find Jayadratha. The Kauravas had not let him even set foot in Kurukshetra. Guarded by thousands of crack soldiers, he was hiding, cooped up inside a tent. Unable to lay hands on Jayadratha, Arjuna flew into a terrible rage and, toppling Niyatayu, Mitradeva, Dandadhara and others, wiping out one contingent of soldiers after another, shouting "Where is Jayadratha? Where is Jayadratha?" he shot across the field like a bolt of lightning. The battle-engrossed soldiers were so bewildered they could not even make out why the sky had become dark in the afternoon.

In no time at all there was total eclipse of the Sun. An all-encompassing darkness. Screeching flocks of birds began speeding back to their nests. Crickets shrilled "krr-krr". Hundreds of torches flared up in the precincts of Kurukshetra. It seemed to all that day had ended, and the sun had set.

Arjuna had failed to keep his vow. A funeral pyre was readied for him, in a central elevated spot, in full view of the Kauravas and Pandavas. Confused and ashamed, Arjuna tearfully paid his last respects to me, Yudhishthira, Bhima, and his aged mother. And feeling that along with him the Gandiva-bow also had been found wanting, he ascended the grand eight-cubit pyre holding his bow and quiver, his head bowed ignominiously. Joining his palms, he closed his eyes; slowly chanting the Gayatri mantra, "Om! *Bhurbhuvah*! *Svaha*! *Tat Savitur*... Om!" he prepared to die. An attendant touched a torch to the pyre with trembling hands. I strained my eyes to spot Jayadratha. He was hiding behind Duryodhana, with the end of his shawl wrapped around his face as women do. He had come to feast his cruel eyes on the fire-immolation of Arjuna.

Then, suddenly, the eclipse cleared Rays flashed from the fiery orb, like streams of water gushing from a smashed clay pot Mocking the torches, the Sun-God stood at his height on the western horizon Screeching flocks of birds left their nests The shrilling of the crickets ceased

"Arjuna, there, see, the sun—and there, see, Jayadratha!" I pointed first to the sun and then to Jayadratha, where he had concealed himself Expert in the art of shooting at a person on the slightest sound made by him, Arjuna in a flash strung a snake-shaft to his Gandiva Speeding harmlessly through the others, it whizzed towards Jayadratha, biting his neck What happened—and how—even Arjuna was at a loss to know

And so the fourteenth day ended, the day of the trick of the eclipse, with Jayadratha lying on the magnificent funeral pyre intended for Arjuna There was no knowing now what turn the war would take

Losing no time, infuriated Duryodhana summoned a meeting of the four-fold chiefs in his tent They had all become disheartened by the heart-stirring, dramatic change of events This was the first time such depression, despair and delusion had struck the Kaurava camp So far as the Pandavas were concerned, everything was happening exactly as I wanted it to happen

To console Duryodhana, drowning in lamenting the killing by Arjuna of his sister's husband, Karna said, "The victory that Kartikeya obtained for Indra, I will obtain for you I'll fire the deadly Vaijayanti-missile granted to me by Indra, and uproot Arjuna and the Pandavas once and for all "

Acharya Kripa thought this hope of Karna ridiculous Instantly springing to his feet, he declared, "Charioteer's son, your entire life has been spent in making sky-high promises Have you fulfilled even one vow of yours? You have always fled from the battle-field—remember the skirmish with the Gandharva Chitrasena, the cattle-lifting in the city of Virata, the chariot duel with Bhima? Your dharma is the art of running away No one has the power to vanquish Arjuna who humbled even Shiva dressed as a Kirata tribal, and who has Sri Krishna always at his side "

Hardly had Acharya Kripa spoken than Karna unsheathed his sword and rushed at him "Brahmin who hurls endless insults at me, today I will cut off your foul tongue!" He placed the blade of his sword on Kripa's neck Duryodhana stepped in between and

pacified Karna But this incident highlighted one bitter truth—how was it possible for Ashvatthaman to tolerate this gross insult to his maternal uncle, Acharya Kripa? He pulled out his sword against Karna—against his life-precious friend Karna "Bragging insulter of my uncle, Karna, your throat should be cut long before Arjuna's!" Saying this, he leapt at Karna No one in the assembly could believe that these two were life-precious friends who had spent their lives discussing the virtues of mind and heart and soul It could not be true No wonder truth is sometimes more incredible than imagination But Duryodhana skilfully pacified Ashvatthaman However, a gentle person, once roused, is beyond control—his wrath goes haywire

"I vow I will never again set eyes on this son of a charioteer!" Declaring this in a determined voice, Guru Drona's son Ashvatthaman stalked out of the tent A veritable temple tottered and collapsed The fact that Ashvatthaman, who loved him more than life itself, had addressed him, even unknowingly, as "Son of a charioteer" made Karna lower his neck in unbearable pain

Drona, Kripa, Karna and Ashvatthaman were infuriated by Jayadratha's death An unprecedented night-battle commenced Guided by the lights of hundreds of flaming torches, Guru Drona launched an offensive against Raja Shibi Somadatta pounced on Satyaki A gory clash ensued Like bamboo clumps exploding in a forest fire at night on a hill slope, the din of clashing weapons created a terrifying cacophony near the waters of the Drishadvati Wiping out Shibi and Bahlika, Guru Drona concentrated his energies on decimating the other Pandava ranks Surrounded by all the five Pandavas, Karna was able nonetheless to becloud them with showers of arrows He routed Yudhishthira, Yudhishthira, harassed, retreated to face Drona Nakula faced Shakuni This led to the first ever clash between Karna and Arjuna But Karna, experienced in nocturnal combat, excelled Arjuna again and again Karna sliced through the ranks of Pandava soldiers at will, like a river of red-hot molten steel There was no emotional tie holding him back now He wrought havoc among the Kekayas, Panchalas and other maha-chariot-heroes With his steed Vayujit, the Wind-Swift One, living up to his name and freely roaming over the battlefield, like an incensed lion ravaging herds of deer incredibly powerful Karna pursued hordes of Pandava warriors fleeing in fear Like a fierce storm ruinously churning the ocean

waves, he whirled through the enemy ranks He knew his father the Sun was no more visible in the sky, but the task of scorching the field of Kurukshetra was now the responsibility of the son Not one—Satyaki, Dhrishtadyumna, Yuyudhana, Bhima, Yudhishthira, Nakula, Sahadeva, Arjuna—could withstand the tremendous onslaught of this mightily rolling river in spate Yudhishthira, terrified, stopped every valiant soldier, asking, "Will Radha's son leave some soldiers alive, or will he turn them all into a single silent flow of blood like the Drishadvati river?" If Karna was not checked, tomorrow would never dawn for the Pandava army The situation was critical Something *had* to be done It was a question of life or death for the Pandavas

Only one warrior was capable of saving them The wonder-weaving war-magician Ghatotkacha! The son of Bhima and Hidimba! I summoned him through Bhima Ghatotkacha had no occasion so far to show his mettle With the blessings of all the Pandavas, the huge-bodied son of Bhima, whistling shrilly, tore down on the Kaurava ranks like a wild forest wind with his host of Rakshasa warriors Screaming, he hurled massive boulders, huge tree trunks, wheels, and spear-like weapons on the Kulindas, Saindhavas, Gandharas, Madras, Avantis and other Kaurava ranks He engaged in a savage, demonic, hour-long duel with Alayudha, the brother of Bakasura In the process, time and again he inadvertently slaughtered many of his own soldiers Finally, at midnight Ghatotkacha butchered Alayudha in a mind-shattering, bloody fashion Terror-stricken, the Kaurava forces scattered helter-skelter, screaming, "Karna, help! Help, Karna!" With the intention of blocking Ghatotkacha, Karna manoeuvred himself in front They dashed against each other like two oceans at high tide Forgetting their individual duels, all the soldiers on the field stood gaping spectators of the death-shattering collision between the son of the Sun-God and the son of Bhima One moment in the sky, the next moment on earth—deceiving Karna with his wonder-weaving war-maya, Ghatotkacha for over two hours roared like a storm-cloud and rained massive chariot-wheels, corpses of elephants, huge boulders and heavy maces on his enemy But, like a steep-sloping golden mountain down which mineral streams flow, Karna stood firm in spite of the wounds all over his body, smilingly enduring the hail of missiles, straight as a *palasha*-tree, not betraying the least sign of unease, and counter-attacked with a swarm of

divine weapons Chanting verses continually in praise of the Sun-God, he circled the field and showered a veritable cataract of arrows on Ghatotkacha Thousands of Kaurava warriors fell screaming victims to the stupor-creating magic war-skills of Ghatotkacha Furious Karna felled Ghatotkacha's charioteer Virupaksha with a single marrow-piercing shaft Worried Duryodhana approached Karna's chariot and, raising his hands, said, "Karna, shoot the Indra-gifted Vaijayanti-missile at the rakshasa Ghatotkacha If you don't, none of the Kaurava soldiers will survive to see tomorrow Raja of Anga, fire the Vaijayanti!"

"No, Duryodhana, the Vaijayanti is reserved for Arjuna It is the only weapon left to redeem the shame I have endured all my life " Karna shouted his refusal so loud that Duryodhana's ear-drums seemed to burst

Hounded by Ghatotkacha, hundreds of thousands of terrified Kaurava soldiers knelt before Karna, supplicating, "Gift-granting Karna, release the Vaijayanti! Save our lives! Kill Ghatotkacha and save us!"

Gift-granter! Two words that had charmed Karna all his life His noble soul melted at the sound of those two words which were, as it were, welded to his life Closing his eyes briefly, he meditated, then, selecting the Indra-gifted Vaijayanti-missile from his quiver, he fitted it to his bow and shot it straight at Ghatotkacha Now his life had become literally an empty quiver

Wonder-weaving Ghatotkacha's massive frame fell on the ground as he screamed his death-yell, it seemed as if the entire firmament had collapsed on the earth When an *ashoka*-tree topples, countless insects and ants are crushed under it, so his huge thudding body pulped many Kaurava soldiers

The nocturnal battle was over

Over also Ghatotkacha's life, which was intended to make Karna helpless Somewhere far away, a wild rooster crowed the birth of dawn The fifteenth extraordinary day had come The memorable first day of the bright fortnight

4

Adopting the Lotus-Formation, Guru Drona stationed himself at the head Despite the continuous battle at night, despite their total lack of rest, the weary warriors of both camps positioned

themselves face to face Here and there were *mgudi* stone-lamps with depleted oil, spluttering out thin wisps of smoke The Pandavas led by Arjuna clashed with the Kauravas As the armies on Kurukshetra dwindled, the waters of the Sarasvati and Drishadvati swelled with the inflow of blood A huge coagulated mass of blood, flesh and mud slid slowly every day along the sloping south of the field The reflections of funeral pyres flickering in the Drishadvati's blood-filled waters were gruesome omens Neither the Pandavas nor the Kauravas had any control on the battlefield Horrible, merciless Death was its uncrowned monarch, choosing whoever he wished to embrace as he whipped the horse of his world-conquering chariot over the field

Guru Drona fought with full strength till mid-day Then, suddenly, someone shouted, "Ashvatthaman is slain! Ashvatthaman is slain!" What happened was that an elephant called Ashvatthaman of Raja Indravarman of the Malavas had been killed

To find out the truth, Drona sped his chariot across the field until he came near the chariot of truth-loving Yudhishthira "Prince Yudhishthira, everyone is shouting, 'Ashvatthaman is slain!' Is it true my beloved Ashu is dead? Tell me, is it true? Let your word be your guru-*dakshina* I have full faith in your word "

"Guru deva, it is true Ashvatthaman is dead But I do not know if it is Ashvatthaman the elephant or Ashvatthaman the hero " Yudhishthira spoke an untruth for the first time in his life The second sentence was spoken indistinctly, mumbling to himself

Throwing away his bow, Drona grieving the loss of his son, adopted, in the chariot itself, the lotus-posture and plunged into deep meditation Faith failed the firm mind of the ninety-year old patriarch Closing his eyes and entering the dark cave of his body, he opened his mind's eye to search for soul's light that radiates within In the meantime, bloodshot-eyed Dhrishtadyumna leapt from his chariot like a bolt of lightning on a tree, and sprinted towards Drona with drawn sword Behind him were the Pandavas, running, shouting "Stop! Stop!" In one bound he jumped inside Drona's chariot and, before anyone could guess what was happening, he had clutched Drona's white horse-tail-thick shining head of hair and, with one swift stroke, decapitated him He flung the head on the ground between the two opposing armies All present closed their eyes on the grisly scene. The white-haired, lotus-faced radiant head that for sixty years had expounded the divine

message of the Isha Upanishad to hundreds of students—"The world is swaddled with the glory of God"—now lay clumsily on the ground, besmeared with mud The greatest of gurus, who had ruled the minds of all with love, rolled in the dust The day had come for Drona, who at every step mocked Karna, to be mocked now by pitiless Death

Shouts of "Drona is dead!" reverberated through the distant ranks, and the fighting stopped spontaneously Warriors from both camps gathered round the chariot to mourn Drona Weeping copiously, Ashvatthaman joined the severed head to his father's trunk The personification of the art and science of archery had found his final peace

Even Karna, humiliated all his life by Drona, wept As he bent to touch the lifeless feet in a last farewell, his streaming tears seemed to be saying to the departed soul, "Guru-deva, all my life you never really understood me "

Without saying anything, he placed his hand with deep affection on Ashvatthaman's shoulder Forgetting everything From the depth of the love in his heart

Maddened by the gory end of his father, Ashvatthaman fired the Narayana-missile, which massacred thousands of Pandava soldiers Eventually I had to step in to neutralise it

The dark shades of evening were beginning to shroud every tent on Kurukshetra Seeing the flaming pyre of Guru Drona made Duryodhana burn with anger, so much so that he even forgot to assess how profound must Ashvatthaman's anguish be and how necessary it was to restrain Guru Drona's son at this juncture He strode forward and, tugging frequently at his slipping shawl, he kicked open the netted screen of his tent-entrance and, like a wounded elephant sliding inside a river, he slipped inside Ashvatthaman's tent He had no idea what he should say, and how he should say it He was like a man who lights a forest fire and is himself consumed in it Seeing him silent, Ashvatthaman, whose face was covered in the white shawl of his father, said excitedly, without lifting his head, "Raja I will take a savage revenge for the savage murder of my father For tomorrow's battle for tomorrow's battle install fierce, heroic, world-conquering, sun worshipping Karna as Commander-in-Chief '

How could the fountain of his love as Karna's friend ever dry up?

Duryodhana emerged from his tent and marched straight to Karna's He stayed there till midnight Striding up and down like a clawless lion, he kept repeating, "Raja of Anga, it was truly never my desire to have Grandsire Bhishma and Guru Drona installed as Commanders-in-Chief of our limitless army I am convinced that the Kaurava army which once, under your leadership, succeeded on a world-conquering mission will tomorrow also succeed in winning the battle of Kurukshetra Karna, hundreds of thousands of drops of holy water from the Ganga which you have offered with such dedication to the Sun-God as *arghya* must be gleaming in the rays of the Sun, tomorrow hundreds of thousands of Pandava soldiers will find heaven by dropping dead at your feet Arjuna's blue skin will turn black when he faces your Jaitra chariot And Bhima—mention of whose name curdles my blood, who mercilessly murdered my brothers—the body of that cruel Bhima, pierced by your deadly arrows, will become as blood-red as his blood-red eyes As for Yudhishthira, who is constantly stooping to look at your narrow feet—well, when he sees your feats as Commander-in Chief tomorrow, he will stoop before you for ever And when the twins Nakula and Sahadeva see the cocked ears of your steed Vayujit, they will realise they are facing their final doom and that trickster from Mathura who stands in a corner and solves others' quarrels, that black milkman will forsake Arjuna's chariot and run to you, begging you to spare his life, like a mean, supplicating mendicant! Karna, you will lead our army tomorrow You will, my friend " He kept repeating this, like a chariot wheel slipped from its axle wobbling along in circles

But Karna kept silent, staring out of the window of his tent, from where he could see the flames of Guru Drona's pyre leaping up on the bank of the Drishadvati Not a single word of Duryodhana penetrated his ear Or if it penetrated, it lingered there, no more than for a second Finally he said this much "Raja, I will lay down my life to secure victory for you Friend who elevated me from charioteer to king! This body of mine which has received so much affection from you will continue to be of total service to you on the battlefield Go, sleep Neither one's sleep nor one's word should ever be left incomplete " Wrapped in the cloak of sleep, night slipped away The torches seemed to flame bright with bitterness

5

The sixteenth dawn arrived, sprinkling Kurukshetra with the fragrance of *parijata*-flowers as golden as the rays of the sun. The second day of the bright fortnight.

Just as the gallery of gods had installed Skanda their leader in their war against the anti-gods, Duryodhana installed Karna Commander-in-Chief in front of the entire army of the Kauravas. The site of the original first-day battle lay six miles to the north. The battle locations changed daily, shifting further and further south.

Karna sat on an *audumbara*-wood seat covered with linen; Duryodhana had tied tightly a bracelet of white odoriferous tuberoses on Karna's right wrist; drawing his sharp sword and waving it skyward he announced, "The Commander-in-Chief of the Kauravas—World-Conquering Raja of Anga, Karna!"

"Victory! Victory! Victory!" Raining multi-hued fragrant flowers on their new Commander-in-Chief, the Kauravas completely forgot for the moment Bhishma and Drona. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras thronged to catch a glimpse of the glowing face of their leader. The *purohitas* and palace bards poured scented oil on his golden curly hair. The instant the perforated pot meant to announce the auspicious hour was dropped gurgling into the bowl of water, Duryodhana, in order to crown Karna, lifted from the golden plate the splendid diadem reserved for the Commander-in-Chief. Gesturing with his hand his refusal, the maha-chariot-hero Karna, born son of Kunti and reared son of Radha, was nonetheless pleased with the honour, and glanced affectionately at his son Vrishasena who was standing beside him. Immediately, Vrishasena placed a golden plate in front of his father. Karna removed the silk cloth covering the plate and, before Duryodhana could stop him, lifted the golden diadem lying on the plate and placed it on his own head.

That diadem was an exact duplicate of mine.

The Emperor of the Firmament, Surya the Sun-God, driving his thousand-rayed chariot on the eastern horizon, paused momentarily. Partridges, *chakravakas*, cranes, wild parrots, red-legged *chakoras* rose from their nests and circled the air in welcome. Pearly dewdrops gleamed on grassblade tips. The breeze made the dewdrops trickle and merge with the vast throbbing heart of

Kurukshetra The universe of moving and unmoving life seemed to dance in a joyous new consciousness

Commander-in-Chief Karna climbed a high mound to select a favourable spot for his army-formation The Kaurava forces deployed themselves in the formidable Crocodile Array

The eyes of the Crocodile were Shakuni and Uluka The head was furious Ashvatthaman The front left foot was Kritavarman, the front right Gautama The hind feet were protected by Raja Shalya of Madra, and the stomach of the Crocodile was Duryodhana surrounded by hundreds of thousands of Kaurava soldiers, with Karna as the mouth protecting him Karna's golden Vijaya-bow, dazzling in the sunlight, seemed to be saying to the Pandava hosts "I will not shoot only arrows today—I will shoot fiery bolts of sunlight " The white horses yoked to his chariot stood still, ears cocked, jaws taut, waiting for the reins to be flicked, and scratching impatiently at the Kurukshetra turf The white pennants, blazing like comets, on his Jaitra chariot, which towered above all, fluttered with the wind, all around his majestic sceptre-symbolled ochre war-flag Tiny golden bells on the flag-pole tinkled sweetly The rear of the chariot was loaded with rods, spears, javelins, discuses, *varuthas*, maces, pipe-guns, swords, tridents, and axes So vast was the number of arrows of all kinds that even a hundred quivers were insufficient to contain them The entire chariot was covered with tiger-skin

Karna lifted and waved his gloriously-garlanded Vijaya-bow when Duryodhana, from the centre of the Crocodile Formation, blew on a special conch to signal the commencement of the offensive His red veins swelling as thick as horses' reins, Karna blew into his Hiranyagarbha conch with such force that all the ravenous hawks and vultures that had congregated in and around the battlefield shot up into the sky, screeching in fright That noise was no conchshell peal—it seemed as if the first-born son of Kunti was hurling the snake-wrath of a wounded pride that had accumulated over a succession of yugas

"Ad-vance!" He lifted high his powerful mailed arm, and shouted his sky-piercing command The Crocodile Formation of the Kauravas opened wide its Karna-jaws and marched inexorably, eager to swallow the Pandavas in its path A growling, voracious, incensed reptile

The Pandava army marched under Arjuna's Command in the

Half-Moon Formation I held the reins of Arjuna's Nandighosha chariot; guarding his right flank was Dhrishtadyumna, on his left, mounted on an elephant, marched red-eyed Bhima leading the elephant column, at the back was Yudhishthira Seeing Karna facing him, Yudhishthira trembled in fear Raising his hand, Arjuna ordered the horn-tips of the moon to push back a little, immediately, blowing on his Devadatta conch, he advanced swiftly As I whipped the horses ahead, it occurred to me that Arjuna had no idea of his relationship with the person he was fighting against, while Karna did That was why the battle had become such a weird travesty

Seeing the white-horsed, lion-roaring Karna charging upon them in his chariot, the Pandava warriors were dumbfounded—was it the scorching sun radiating from a mountain peak, or was it the sun flashing its rays from a dazzling, gold plated chariot? Karna's face glowed like a golden jar bathed in light Never before had it shone so brilliantly A jolt of the chariot made his thick curly hair hanging down on his broad shoulders flick sideways, then it moved back to normal He had the shoulders of a bull, he charged with the energy of a forest storm He was an agitated ocean, spilling over at high tide He was an erupting volcano, reducing all to ashes in its path His blue eyes scoured the field for the ape-banner But I had been very clever today I had so reversed the ape-banner on the pole that the ape symbol flapped only on one side—the side facing the Pandavas The two armies collided like roaring giants

Unable to spot the ape-banner, bewildered Karna swung his chariot to face our elephant ranks Shooting endless streams of poisoned arrows like torrential rains at the time of the ascendancy of the Mriga constellation, he succeeded in piercing the feet of our elephants in his very first assault Maddened by the poison circulating in their blood, the elephants broke ranks and fled helter-skelter, trampling thousands of Pandava soldiers in panic The desperately surviving warriors, thrashing in agony as they fell down wounded, were reduced to bleeding pulp

Incensed Bhima ran to stop the carnage of our elephants by Karna, he was obstructed by Ashvatthaman They fought like two fierce clawing tigers Satyaki clashed with Vinda and Anuvinda Dhrishtadyumna trapped Acharya Kripa in a pincer movement Shrutikirti attacked Shalya, Raja of Madra Sahadeva and

Duhshasana showered arrows at each other Duryodhana abandoned his position in the centre of the formation and manoeuvred his chariot to confront Yudhishthira, immediately I blocked his path, with Arjuna ready to protect Yudhishthira As the sun rose high, so did the clouds of dust, obscuring the sky The trumpeting of elephants drowned the din of weapon clashing against weapon Unable to spot Arjuna anywhere, Karna angrily decimated the ranks of Panchala and Matsya under his chariot The higher the sun rose, the greater became his chariot's velocity Sometimes spear, sometimes lance, sometimes mace—he hurled one weapon after another, pausing only to wipe the drops of perspiration under his ears

High noon Bhima toppled the skilled warrior Kshemadhurti off his chariot Though pursued by crack Samshaptaka troops, Arjuna slew Raja Danda and Dandadhara, which so infuriated Ashvatthaman that he charged blindly at Arjuna A confused clash occurred where Karna had penetrated the Panchala ranks So much so that each warrior first asked which camp his adversary belonged to, they fought bewildered, like drunks

I saw the Panchalas and Matsyas systematically being annihilated by heroic Karna, and to stop the massacre I repeatedly warned Nakula by blowing deep into my Panchajanya conch "Nakula! Nakula! Turn your chariot towards Karna!" In the clamour of battle it took more than half an hour for my message to reach Nakula It was six hours later that he arrived with his army to reinforce the Matsyas, without any further delay he charged at Karna

But the army leader he chose to attack was no gentle waterfall, he was a resistless bolt of lightning He repulsed all Nakula's arrows, he repeatedly unchariоted Nakula, he laughed at Nakula's ineptitude In the end, he locked his towering chariot with defenceless Nakula's and said, "Go, send your elder brother Arjuna to fight me I'm letting you off, be my messenger "

Nakula went back humiliated, his head hanging down But he was unaware of the fact that Karna, the first-born son of Kunti, the eldest of the Pandavas, was doing what he did because Nakula's mother Madri, at the time of her sati, had placed Nakula's welfare in Kunti Devi's hands, and Karna was seeing to it that the promise given by his mother to Madri was honoured Though the time had come for the cosmic fire to engulf and consume all, Karna would

act so that the promise to the Queen Mother Kunti Devi was scrupulously kept That evening Yudhishthira's son Prativindhya cut off Chitraraja's head

The sunrays of evening were casting long tree shadows on Kurukshetra when I drove Arjuna's Nandighosha chariot for the first time to face Karna's Jaitra chariot They flared up, and their faces glowed like fires fanned by the wind They screamed at each other so shrilly that even the nearby elephants took fright and fled Aiming at each other, they fired an endless stream of heavy arrows that shrouded the sky in an instant, like clouds overcasting the sky at the ascendancy of the Mriga constellation For an hour they rained lethal, swift, noisy arrows on each other Sparks flashed from their coats of mail Even before night fell, those sparks lit up the sky like so many stars Scorched by those sparks, Karna's charioteer Satyasena fell down dead, pierced by Arjuna's arrows The sky which that day was blanketed by Arjuna's and Karna's arrow-swarms, the sky that canopied Kurukshetra like a gigantic umbrella of wild goat's hair, never became cloudless after that encounter, because the night-resembling magic-creating warrior Mayavi, son of Maya, shot rays of pitch nocturnal blackness that darkened even the arrows of the two adversaries The hideous sixteenth day of the bright fortnight passed in this manner

6

Night wrapped Kurukshetra in dense darkness An inky blackness shrouded the horizon With one exception—the flickering flames of Satyasena's pyre on the bank of the Drishadvati relieved a little the ubiquitous gloom

Satyasena was not only the man who held the reins of Karna's chariot, he was not only his wife's brother, not just a man dedicated totally to Kaurava welfare, he was a drum that sounded warning when confusing conflicts inevitably rose from the circumstances connected with Karna's life as a king He was a genuine well wisher So Karna sat and brooded on the bank of the Drishadvati, staring fixedly at Satyasena's pyre

He saw Satyasena in each yellow tongue of flame that leapt from the pyre to lick the pitch black hide of the night elephant, the same Satyasena who used to meet him at an odd hour of night, carrying a pot on his shoulder, on the bank of the Ganga

He had gifted away his flesh-ear-rings and skin-armour, he was loaded with death-like curses on his head, he was a treasure-house of refulgence but, living a life of the utmost simplicity, he had arrived at last at this spot He had let loose Vaijayanti, the last miracle-missile he had, on Ghatotkacha, and he was now reduced to nothing He was alone, absolutely so

But even in this utter aloneness, there was in him an invincible soul-radiance born of the fervour of his noble blood, his totality of dedication, and his worship of the Sun-God—and this is what sustained him through crises That soul-radiance determined his real life That soul-radiance made him slice forward through life like an arrow shot from a bow I am part of a larger radiance, I am inspired secretly by something divine in me—this was the one throbbing refrain of his life's song This confidence was not given to anyone else It was very difficult to understand the nature of this radiance His life had two clear aspects His noble soul deriving strength from his subtle, inexplicable faith in the Sun-God connection, and his mind and body tied to the daily domestic duties of social life Sometimes the two merged in an undeniable and unimaginable union—and that paradox made his life so full of confusion and conflict, so puzzling and mysterious

And now his charioteer Satyasena had left him and gone on a never-ending journey He knew all too well that more than half of a maha chariot-hero's excellence depended on the skill of his charioteer His direction, his speed was where his charioteer drove him With Satyasena gone for ever, it was now perfectly possible for the once freely-roaming tiger-skin-covered Jaitra chariot, careening through the four-fold ranks of the Pandava army, to get bogged down in the blood-and-slime swamp of Kurukshetra

His mind a void, his eyes unblinking, fixedly staring at Satyasena's pyre, he stood all alone on the bank of the Drishadvati Had despair overpowered him? Numbness? Absentmindedness? Or had he transcended his senses, gone beyond all the dusty limitations of the world's horizon?

I was sure, completely sure that his heroism was great, as was his spirit of renunciation, his love for his subjects was extraordinary, but the most extraordinary quality in him was his devotion to the Sun-God, and truly extraordinary was the purity he had gained by the strength of his *tapasya* But but the way he had slandered Draupadi and stained her spotless virtue in the packed assembly

had irretrievably tarnished his excellence They all said that it was Duryodhana who had made Karna into a pitiable figure, but no one knew that it was Draupadi who had made him deserving of pity An insult to humanity is pardonable once, but a slur on woman—from whose womb humanity takes birth—is so obnoxious as to be never forgivable The society, the country where woman is violated and shamed, is the society and country that digs its own ditch of doom, and dies in it

But I also knew that the Pandava army was afraid of his valour He had to an extent redeemed himself of the insult to Draupadi by honouring the Queen Mother Kunti Devi Had he revealed the truth of his relationship with Kunti Devi, the Pandavas would not have fought the Kauravas They would not have fought the Kauravas even to revenge the slur on Draupadi

If anyone had protected the virtuous name of a mother who floated away her new-born son on the Ashva's waters, it was Karna

The fact that he was responsible for the unforgivable sullying of the name of the virtuous wife Draupadi pricked Karna's conscience all his life He had wanted me to convey a humble message to her "If at all it is possible for her, ask her to forgive me "

Was it possible that he hadn't heard from Hiranyamayi how strong was Draupadi's attraction for him nor the suggestion that Draupadi spend two months each with all the six brothers? In spite of that, he had thought it out and decided to fight on the side of the Kauravas, and wasn't his decision of paying the price for not killing the Pandavas an indirect way of showing his deep respect for Draupadi?

That is why, taking everything into account, I knew that Karna's valour was a source of fearful danger for the Pandavas

Making up his mind, Karna rose from the stone seat Briefly, he stared in the direction of the darkness enveloped eastern skyline Sighing deeply, he walked towards his tent for a good night's sleep Suddenly a heart-piercing wail rent the thick darkness on the Drishadvati river "Bhai-ya-ya?" Hearing that scream, even the flames on Satyasena's pyre trembled It was Vrishali Satyasena's sister Karna's wife

Ashvatthaman had despatched a horse-rider to Hastinapura with news of Satyasena's death As soon as she heard the news, Vrishali, lady of a charioteer family, without informing anyone,

left her chores and, driving a chariot by herself, sped like the wind, like a river overflowing its banks, for the last darshan of her brother

She ran towards the pyre as if her dress was on fire Karna did not see her, he recognised her by her scream, and instantly the calm of the pool of his memories was disturbed A single eddy whirled again and again "Son of a charioteer! Son of a charioteer!"

Seeing Vrishali, his stillness, his composure, his silence vanished instantly

He seized his incoherent, blindly running wife in his strong embrace Who knows what emotions were contained in that togetherness?

"Maharaja! Maharaja!" She beat her face, round as a pot, on his massive chest For she was after all Karna's wife, a lady full of tender familial feelings, who sacrificed for and sympathised with others

She laid her troubled head on Karna's broad chest

It seemed that the ink-black darkness opened its eyes to witness their close, poignant embrace The still waters of the Drishadvati river re-rippled The battleground of Kurukshetra was witness

But he did not say even one word The freely flowing tears from Vrishali's large eyes tried again and again to resurrect a fresh fire in his peaceful, calm, lost in-a distant-horizon mind

Gleaming fitfully in the light of the pyre, their bodies united They were locked in each other, lost in each other They were one being, as it were

The rhythm of the blood coursing through Karna's veins gave Vrishali some consolation "Tomorrow either Arjuna embraces the all accepting earth of Kurukshetra, or or your husband travels the noble path to the golden orb of the Sun "

He helped his life-long, uncomplaining, beloved wife into the Jaitra chariot, and personally escorted her to the palace of the Kauravas in Hastinapura

7

Returning from the palace, he did not fail to notice the swans slumbering in the courtyard A desire rose in him to stir and disperse the reflections these proud birds cast in the palace pool,

glimmering in the soft light of the torches Quickly he removed the large yellow sapphire ring from his finger and flung it in the pool The reflections shivered The images shook The sleeping swans flapped awake, and thumped their webbed feet Ripples formed in the pool Seeing them expand in ever-widening circles, he laughed to himself

He strode swiftly towards the ancient gate of the palace's main wall in order to return to his tent Pausing for a moment near the main gate, he looked up at Vrishali's palace She was standing beside a window with his youngest son Vrishaketu He was the only son of Karna, safe in Hastinapura, removed from the cosmic-fire of the Kurukshetra carnage He made an effort to raise his hand, he let his eyes linger once on the endless flight of stairs, then, deciding not to lift his hand, he stepped outside the gate As if with dogged determination He stepped out of the palace like an elephant emerging from a lake As if shutting off his mind, forsaking all family ties

It was past midnight when he reached his tent in Kurukshetra Outside, near the door, stood Duryodhana, anxiously waiting for him

Duryodhana was upset, wondering if his would be Commander-in Chief of tomorrow had deserted and returned to Champanagari Seeing Karna, his face lit up Swift as an arrow, he rushed forward and stopped the chariot by firmly gripping Vayujit's saddle The horse snorted heavily, foaming at the mouth

Without giving Karna time even to dismount, Duryodhana stepped up to him and said, "Raja of Anga, your Satyasena is no more with us Who will drive your chariot tomorrow?" Even in the dim light of the torch one could see Duryodhana's pointed nostrils flaring

"Raja, give me a skilled, reliable charioteer You will see then how my chariot races through the field like a resistless wind '

"Skilled reliable charioteer?" Creasing his forehead, and striking his right fist twice in the cupped palm of his left hand, Duryodhana thought hard A faint sweat was discernible on his brow His thick curved eyebrows became more curved In the yellowish reddish light of the torch his red face glowed even more fierce, looking almost sinister, as his large pink eyes darted into the inner corners of his mind, as if peering into the future Any sharp observer could guess from the harsh look on his countenance that he was in great anxiety

The major dilemma of who was competent to be Karna's charioteer made Duryodhana forget even the tortuous route his life had taken before arriving at such a crisis His finely woven, expensive shawl of Kaurava royalty, which was always slipping from his shoulders, had fallen on the ground without his being aware of it It had escaped his mind to adjust it back to position with a swift gesture, as was his habit

Both were silent for some time Like two stone statues in the Kaurava palace

"Raja of Anga, if you don't mind, there is only one warrior whom I can recommend Only he is fit to hold the reins of your chariot " The Duryodhana stone-statue broke the silence

"Who?" Karna removed his diadem and heavy coat of mail, placing them in a large tray His thick curly locks flowed out like free-flying autumn birds The crease mark left by his coat-of-mail was discernible on his handsome neck

"Raja Shalya of the Madras " Duryodhana placed his brawny right hand on Karna's shoulder

"Shalya? Raja, you forget Shalya is related to the Pandavas—he is their maternal uncle, the Queen Mother Madri Devi's own brother This war began indeed with a throw of dice, but please don't gamble now in our hour of crisis " He squinted his blue, long eyes A wreath of wrinkles appeared on his golden forehead

"Karna, even before the war started the respect I showed to Shalya was different from the respect I gave to other rajas It is true that he left the kingdom of Madra with the intention of joining the Pandavas But I intercepted him, and by ordering, at every stage of his journey, the erection of welcome arches in his honour, and by despatching royal messengers to felicitate him with expensive gifts, I succeeded in winning him over to our side He has taken a solemn vow to help the Kauravas in this war During the last sixteen days, he has fought for us with determination and dedication Repeatedly he has reinforced our warriors when they were harassed by Bhima Take my word for it, Shalya is not one who will now go back on his word Kshatriyas do not repent, Kshatriyas do not retreat—when the time comes they readily embrace even death to achieve heaven You know this very well Family links are for ordinary mortals, rajas have different ties Their links are Word given, total dedication, performance on the field of battle " Without waiting for Karna's reply, he clapped his hands Prabhanjana entered

"Prabhanjana, go, respectfully request Maharaja Shalya of the Madras to come here " He pointed in the direction of Shalya's tent

Shalya appeared in no time and stood before them He was expecting only Duryodhana to be present—at most, Ashvatthaman, and Shakuni The instant he saw Karna, his forehead furrowed He had no knowledge of how Karna was related to him That apart, he had not forgotten the bitter humiliation he had suffered at the hands of Karna during the world conquest mission Glancing wryly at Karna, Shalya jerked his shawl tight But Karna, son of Surya, was not angered by Shalya's Kshatriyan pride, he did not despise Shalya, he was not disheartened He remained silent, unmoving

"Maharaja, I have inconvenienced you at a very odd hour, but it concerns a matter of the utmost urgency and importance " Duryodhana broke the heavy silence

"What matter, Maharaja?" Shalya turned his back on Karna and looked straight at Duryodhana

"Our tomorrow is in your hands " Duryodhana fixed his pink eyes on Shalya

"My hands? How?" Unable to surmise what Duryodhana meant, Shalya creased his forehead

"Maharaja, tomorrow tomorrow only you must be the charioteer of the Kaurava Commander-in Chief " Duryodhana placed his muscular hand on Shalya's shoulder and looked into Shalya's eyes for an answer

"Raja!" Shalya uttered the word at a high pitch, and lapsed into silence Then, turning to Karna, like a charioteer swiftly plucking irregular strands of hair from a horse's tail, he fired a volley of words "So this is the gross, cheap ruse devised by this son of a charioteer to take revenge on me? He couldn't take it out on the Pandavas, so he uses you to do this to me! King, you are asking a highborn Kshatriya to accept the reins of a son of a charioteer! Am I expected to hold the reins for a man who should be driving our chariots? It's a grave mistake on your part—a very wrong thing you have done—to hand over command of the army to him when I still happen to be around!" Shalya roared

Karna kept calm No flicker of feeling He kept staring out of the screened window at the darkness outside

"Raja of Madra, the Kauravas for whose sake you are here to fight today are the very ones who have accorded the full honours of Kshatriyahood to the Raja of Anga in the presence of the citizens of Hastinapura—*they* have installed him their Commander-in-Chief And don't forget that all the rajas who have come as allies of the Kauravas are here because of the success of Karna's world-conquest Had I the chance, and had I the power, you would have seen Karna, the Raja of Anga, installed Commander-in-Chief on the very first day of battle If I had the skills of a charioteer, I would gladly have accepted the reins of his chariot I leave it entirely to you As the eldest prince of the Kauravas, I make this earnest appeal to you, because on the strength of your skills as a charioteer depend the lives of hundreds of thousands of Kaurava soldiers " Duryodhana made his final request

Shalya, upset, was briefly lost in thought, he stared fixedly at Karna's narrow feet He blinked his eyes Wrinkles creased his forehead After deep reflection, he said, "I am ready, Raja of the Kauravas " As he emerged from the tent, he did not flick the end of his shawl haughtily

Hardly had he left than Duryodhana strode up to Karna and held Karna's strong arms in his hands

"Raja of Anga, what Grandsire Bhishma could not achieve, what Guru Drona failed to accomplish, you will accomplish tomorrow Remember the broken and shattered bowman Karna under the garland of blue lotuses in the arena? Remember brave Karna, seeing the reflection of his ink-black face in the sacred fire-pit of the *svayamvara* hall in the city of Kampilya? Remember the flames on the pyre of Sudamana on the bank of the Ganga? Remember Shon's helmeted head? You remember, don't you? The agonising ends of Grandsire Bhishma, Guru Drona, Shon and Satyasena? Raja of Anga, see to it that Arjuna's bow-string is so snapped tomorrow that it winds around his blue neck and strangles him That blue-skinned driver of his should not even realise that Arjuna has turned blue-black, suffocated, and fallen Speak, Raja of Anga!" He shook Karna by the arms His pink eyes surveyed Karna's broad forehead as if reading his own future

"Raja, I will do my life's best to see that victory is yours Go, and announce that all mendicants of neighbouring cities will be granted liberal charity tomorrow " His words reassured Duryodhana

Cheerfully adjusting his shawl, thumping Karna's arms, Duryodhana emerged from the tent Removing from its stand and holding aloft one of the flaming torches, Prabhanjana led the way Both shapes entered and disappeared in Duryodhana's tent The night of the sixteenth day, the second day of the bright fortnight As if sensing what lay in the womb of tomorrow, the wind blowing over the Drishadvati clapped its hands softly to lull the Kurukshetra-child to sleep in the river's lap But sleep did not come to Kurukshetra Nor was it going to come

My spy brought me all this information with all possible speed Listening to it I heard someone laugh and remark, "We should despatch Nakula and Sahadeva to Maharaja Shalya's tent, remind him of our silken family links, and win him over to our side And if that doesn't work, then Shalya should be advised to mock and distract Karna with insulting remarks about his low birth while driving his chariot and so break his single minded battle-dedication " What a weird suggestion!

The giver of this gratuitous advice had no idea that a self-respecting Raja of Shalya's stature could not even think of sullying his Kshatriyahood with such shameful conduct Not even under the spell of family sentiment If that had been his intention, he would have betrayed the Kauravas much earlier during the ferocious sixteen-day war Had he been against Kauravan principles, he could easily have returned with his army to the kingdom of Madra

So far, in the war, one had indeed witnessed once-forgivable brutality repeated—but no betrayal

In any case, no matter what Shalya did, Karna's resolve was absolute, unbreakable Karna on the battlefield was going to prove a master of over-kill carnage—for wasn't he the Karna who could not be deflected from his purpose by the lady who gave him birth who informed him of his blood tie with the other Pandavas, wasn't he the same Karna who in spite of what I offered him could not be swerved from his loyalty to the Kauravas? This was the Karna who had turned down the advice of Grandsire Bhishma given from a death-bed of arrows with the same fixity of resolve that made him gift away his flesh ear-rings and skin armour How could this Karna who knew he was the son of the Sun-God allow his radiance to be tarnished by a person like Shalya?

No defection was possible. Not by Shalya, and not by Karna

I advised all to go to sleep peacefully I knew that though the dark fortnight of Amavasya was over, ahead of us lay darker nights

The seventeenth day of battle dawned, the third of the bright fortnight Both armies had dwindled to less than half their original strengths Many tents had become soldierless voids Like stables bereft of horses

In the first flush of dawn, the Commander-in-Chief of the Kauravas, the first-born Pandava, Karna climbed a tall mound to survey the day's topography For the past sixteen days he had kept track of the ebb and flow of battles from this very mound, for which reason the place had been named the "Karna-Lookout" Because drum-beats had announced the charity-giving, the entire area of the mound swarmed with mendicants Gold plates and salvers of variegated sizes and shapes, heaped with diamonds, cat's-eyes, pearls, rubies, *pravalas* and other precious stones, were placed all around Karna had decided to liberally give away the remainder of the treasure that he had acquired from his world-conquest His head wore a diadem identical to mine On his wrists were strinqed tuberoses

As soon as the auspicious time indicated by the royal *purohita* approached, Karna pushed his rose-red hands inside the heaps of diamonds and rubies Giving away fistfuls of gems to each mendicant, he folded his palms and humbly honoured them His head—which had not bowed even before Jarasandha, before such illustrious rajas as Shalya, Shighra, Rukmaratha, before the valiant Pandavas, not even before me except on one or two occasions, and not even before Jamadagni's son Parashurama at the time of trial—his sturdy, round, gold-complexioned, sunflower-like head, with its diadem, now bowed to each village mendicant with sincere humility Why? What did he have in mind? I felt I knew Because because the undemanding spontaneous wishes of a supplicant are always superior to expected blessings He wanted the blessings of simple ordinary people, offered to a simple ordinary soldier

His charity-giving was nearly over, but the golden rays of the sun did not shower *parijata*-blossoms on Kurukshetra, as always earlier The blue sky swarmed with dark clouds Even the flocks of birds that nested in the kadambas, acacias, mahuas, *kimshukas*

and other trees that ringed Kurukshetra, trilling varied melodies at sunrise, were mute or chirping half heartedly, inside their beaks, so it seemed The plants and creepers of Kurukshetra, joyously burgeoning at sunrise, were today hanging their heads, looking sleepy and desiccated There were no dewdrops of autumn sparkling on them Nor would they sparkle Because life itself was looking lifeless

8

Today's battle-site the foothill of a high peak named Amina From the west streamed the armies of the Pandavas, and from the east the armies of the Kauravas, gathering near the site On all four sides of Kurukshetra the soldiers of all the kingdoms of Aryavarta—Madra, Magadha, Matsya, Mathura, Malava, Vatsa, Vanga, Videha, Vidarbha, Kulinda, Kirata, Kashi, Koshala, Kamboja, Kamarupa, Nishadha, Abhira, and Gandhara—had assembled, curious to witness the outcome of the battle, all were ready to fight with single-minded dedication Honouring the field of battle were the multi coloured and multi shaped flags of all the capitals—Shakala, Girivraja, Viratnagar, Avanti, Prayaga, Tamranagara, Kusumapura, Kundinapura, Chandanavati, Kash thamandapa, Varanasi, Ayodhya, Champavati, Mahishmati, and Pushkaravati

Today the Kaurava forces had chosen a circular battle formation, resembling the disc of the sun A formation that stretched in circumference for many *yojanas* behind the Jaitra chariot of the Commander-in-Chief Karna Paying homage to his Jaitra chariot, Karna circumambulated it With eyes closed, he chanted shlokas in praise of the sun

Behind Arjuna's Nandighosha-chariot stood the Pandava forces arranged in the shape of a bull, the vehicle of the god of death Yama Its rear-most section stretched as far as the very edge of the foothill

The rear of the Jaitra-chariot was packed with all manner of weapons including spears, javelins, shields, maces, divine missiles, swords, chakras, throw-sticks, fire-guns, and varied arrows Waving atop the chariot was the war-flag, with a chain shaped stick symbol His wrist braceleted with strings of large tuberoses, Karna placed his right foot on the foot-step of the chariot and

climbed inside His weight made the chariot bells tinkle, the flower garlands sway, the elephant chain on top of the chariot and the stick-symbolled flag shook briefly, then became still As soon as the Commander-in-Chief mounted Jaitra, his charioteer Shalya rushed to the front of the vehicle He picked up tall horses' reins, which looked like elephant tusks One horse was exceptionally tall Shalya held the whip, which was encased in tiger-skin

Shalya as charioteer! I laughed to myself Time had taken a terrible revenge against Shalya*

I shouted to Arjuna, standing at the head of the Pandava forces, to mount his chariot, but he remained immobile He was not going to do so until I gripped the reins of the Nandighosha chariot and held the whip I smiled, and climbed the Nandighosha, deliberately left foot first Picking up the whip, I flicked it strongly

The moment I blew war-cries out of my white Panchajanya conch, Arjuna climbed into the chariot Blowing his own Devadatta conch in faultless harmony with mine, he screamed peal after peal

This was the first time our armies shouted victory cries using both our names The victory shouts bounced against the hill and reverberated through the Pandava ranks All Kurukshetra echoed with the cries

The sky was still overcast The only way for it to clear up was through victory shouts piercing the firmament The Commander-in Chief of the Kauravas heard the war-cries of the Pandavas and seemed to blossom like a sunflower radiant in sunlight—he was now not just Karna, not the son of Radha, not the son of Kunti—he had shed his family ties long ago as he had discarded his skin-armour and flesh ear-rings He was now simply the Commander-in Chief—simply the refulgent son of the Sun For an instant he glanced in the direction of the obscured eastern horizon

Holding his white, huge Hiranyagarbha conch firmly in both hands, he gazed once at the sprawling circular array of the Pandava forces The next moment his neck, thick as a healthy elephant's leg, swelled His veins became taut Inhaling deeply in his massive chest, he blew celestial peals from his Hiranyagarbha conch Even I was not familiar with these peals that inspired and excited the assembled soldiers His peals cut through the din of tabors, *dundhubi*, *dimdim* and *mridanga* drums, and reached me in the Pandava camp They were not sounds, they were dazzling streams of light

Lifting repeatedly his Bow of Victory in his right hand, and ordering "Forward march! Attack", he advanced like the ocean agitated on a moonless night Like the death-music of a raging forest fire Like a bolt of lightning. Like a volcano consuming everything around it Like a second sun, keeping in mind a son's duty, as if bent on fulfilling the task of a shrouded sun to make red-hot the field of Kurukshetra

None except I in the countless ranks of the Kauravas and Pandavas knew that Karna was the son of Surya The Kaurava warriors were glorifying him as the Raja of Anga The Pandava warriors described him as the son of Radha and tried thereby to reassure their agitated minds that they had nothing to fear so far as his military prowess was concerned There was no one calling him the son of Surya Nonetheless, now fully aware of his identity, the son of Surya, the resolute, unparalleled warrior, intolerant and quick to take affront, on his own, all by himself, a hero of charities, advanced inexorably

Supporting him, the Kauravas advanced also—his sons Vrishasena and Chitrasena, Ashvatthaman, Shakuni, Duhshasana, Kripa, Duryodhana, Kritavarman and others

I alighted from the Nandighosha, went inside the tent, and fetched the oil-vessel with which to lubricate the wheels The warriors assigned to protect the Nandighosha rushed forward, among them were Bhima, Satyaki, Uttamaujas, Dhrishtadyumna, Nakula, Sahadeva, Yuyudhana Clouds of dust obscured the sky War-drums, victory-cries, the trumpeting of elephants, the neighing of horses, the clatter of chariot-wheels, the twang of taut bowstrings—all these combined to produce an eerie cacophony which reverberated as it echoed against the hill called Amina The flicking of whips mingled with the whinnying of steeds Like two flocks of Garuda birds approaching from opposite directions and clashing with an uproarious clamour of fluttering wings, the warriors of the armies shot their arrows at each other, colliding head-on Soldier grappled with soldier The battle began

Empty wine jars, flung from speeding chariots, rolled on the field of Kurukshetra Many chariots lost control as they struck the jars, and as a result of horse-riders toppling over them from behind, they were reduced to smithereens Karna's chariot, pulled by five swan-white horses, was manoeuvred so skilfully across the bumpy terrain that the foe-destroying heroic son of Surya, poised

one instant at one corner of the field, had, in the next instant, before anyone could make out, slipped into the ranks of the Pandava cavalry, elephants and foot-soldiers That fearless Commander-in-Chief was issuing orders so loudly that the unhorsed and unchariоted Kaurava warriors were inspired and stood up to fight again They fell upon the Panchalas with whatever vehicle they could mount Karna advanced like a mighty river that proceeds to join the ocean accompanied by myriads of doom-dancing waves, accompanying him were wine-and-war intoxicated elephants, headed by thousands of agitated troops, contemptuous of cavalry and foot-soldiers On his right was Chitrasena, and on his left Prasena, behind him was Vrishasena His three illustrious sons advanced with him, giving protective cover

One got the impression that the Sun itself was launching an attack with its array of sunrays

Seeing Karna advancing, I halted Arjuna's chariot midway, in order to delay the troops of Hastinapura who were following us I knew that his blue eyes had unerringly singled me out, and he was concentrating on attacking Arjuna His restless movements made that clear enough

As he approached nearer, Dhrishtadyumna, who protected our left flank, in a swift action manoeuvred his Panchala forces to a position in front of our army I had advised this primary tactic to Dhrishtadyumna the previous night Exactly as planned, he stationed his Panchala forces to receive the brunt of Karna's volcanic thrust Seeing the Panchala troops suddenly facing him, Karna plunged within the enemy ranks like a wounded, maddened elephant splashing in the waters of a lake Lifting high his Bow of Victory, Karna let loose endless volley upon volley of venomous arrows upon the countless Panchala elephant ranks—like rain showering at the ascendancy of the Mriga constellation The venom made the elephants run helter-skelter Their rancous trumpeting made it impossible for anyone to guess what was happening within the Panchala ranks Clouds of dust dimmed the sky even more thickly

Karna, son of Surya, appeared now in the shape of Death to those Panchala warriors who, at the time of Draupadi's *svayamvara,* made fun of his humiliation in the open assembly, and they screamed for fear of their lives Like a *yajna*-fire reducing a bundle of firewood to ashes, his fiery arrows consumed the Panchala

heroes Karna, son of Radha, looked as fearful and incandescent as a flame-of-the-forest whose every branch is laden with blood red flowers, or as flocks upon flocks of red *saranga* birds Like a bush-fire at the foot of a mountain streaking towards the forest, fearless Karna scorched the protecting Panchala ranks one by one and, exhorting the warriors behind him, kept advancing

He had cast off all confusions that had so far been troubling his mind Only one idea gripped him now—the easily heady thought of war. Like a furious, famished, roaring lion pouncing on a herd of wild horses grazing in a pasture, he penetrated into the Panchala ranks

In less than half an hour he had decimated the Panchala vanguard His arrows fell like swarms of locusts, they showered like a continuous torrent of rain during the ascendancy of the Mriga constellation He kept shooting as many arrows, five or even six, simultaneously as could be held and nocked by the four fingers of his right hand—and the shafts sped from his heavy bow in all four directions in the twinkling of an eye It was impossible to tell when he pulled the arrows out of its quiver and when he strung them on his bow and took aim Like grass on the surface of a flowing stream, moving in unbroken continuity, his hands and eyes worked in a single fluid motion while shooting arrows Every second the battered Panchalas withdrew step by step The ranks broke Dhrishtadyumna, leader of the Panchalas, began to retreat

To prevent the rout of the Panchalas, the Raja of Chedi, Satyaki and the Pandava regiment of Indraprastha rushed to their help But, just as in times of high tide, the ocean rejects the entry of streams from outside, the first Pandava, long armed Karna, repulsed the Pandava reinforcements Piercing the elephant ranks of the Chedis, he bewildered them totally, so that they were unable to tell enemy from friend In the first hour of battle itself, Karna decapitated the illustrious Panchala heroes—Bhanudeva, Chitrasena, Senabindu Tapana and Shurasena Hundreds and thousands of Chedi warriors and Satyaki were trampled beneath the wheels of his tall chariot Screaming "Kill! Kill! , he careened through the four-fold army ranks like a bolt of lightning freely coursing through the sky mandala

I carefully manoeuvred the regiment of Arjuna out of the rear of the Panchala army, and brought it into headlong clash with the suicide squad called the Samshaptakas Arjuna's invincible arrows

whizzed above my head and the Samshaptakas fled wherever they found escape outlets Arjuna's soldiers pursued them, making them arrow-targets

9

Demolishing the vanguard of the formation, Karna penetrated deep inside and clashed with Yudhishthira The instant he glimpsed dharma-loving Yudhishthira's chariot, he toppled Yudhishthira's white chariot-pennant with his very first arrow A peacock shorn of its crest, Yudhishthira's chariot veered skilfully right and left in order to shake off Karna But Karna confronted it in every direction Avoiding aiming at the body itself, Karna shot arrows so accurately at the chariot poles and mouths of the wooden quivers that Yudhishthira was unable to move even though he had his bow at the ready Harassing Yudhishthira interminably, he hurled Yudhishthira's charioteer Indrasena out of the vehicle Indrasena fell down, dead

Rushing to Yudhishthira's help in a body came Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki, the five sons of Draupadi, Shikhandin, Bhima, Nakula and Sahadeva But Karna, son of Radha, pierced through the ring around Yudhishthira so expertly that they never got a chance to regroup and attack unitedly

After the first three hours of battle, the sky began to clear The field of Kurukshetra filled with light Surya, the sky-emperor, the dispenser of life-giving radiance to all animate and inanimate creatures, stood on the eastern horizon Karna experienced the heat of the sun on his arm, and for an instant stopped shooting with his Bow of Victory His eyes became, as it were, mouths which gulped the rays of the sun Those rays were like wine to him Seeing his Bow of Victory inactive, his charioteer Shalya cautioned him, saying, "Son of a charioteer! Son of a charioteer!" Shalya did not know the truth of his identity—even had he known, he would not have believed it

The darshan of the Sun transported not only the body but the mind of heroic Karna also into rapture The battlefield in front of that golden sky-hero became, as it were, something as trivial and contemptible as a blade of grass Shooting arrows as multicoloured as the feathers of the sheldrake, that super-hero, that *prabhadraka* Karna, roaring like a lion, swooped within the ranks of the Chedis and Panchalas

Observing that Karna was engrossed in battle, the mighty hero Bhima seized this occasion to rout the thousands upon thousands of the Kaurava ranks of Madra, Gandhara, Saindhava and others like an ocean flooding its boundaries at high tide Anguished by the thought that Karna had killed his powerful son Ghatotkacha, the wind-god's son Bhima surveyed the battle area searching for an opportunity to crush Karna's son in his incredibly strong arms And that opportunity came his way

Lost in the confusion of battle, getting separated more and more each minute from Karna, Prasena unluckily came within range of Bhima, right in front of him He appeared in front of Bhima like a hill of the Nishadha range compared to a long, broad and towering mountain of the Himalayas But he stood there, firm, like a Nishadha hill, confronting Bhima That illustrious heroic son of Karna fought Bhima for half an hour or so, and was felled finally by a moon-shaped arrow shot by Bhima He lay on the ground, flailing in fatal agony

"Prasena's fallen! Prasena's fallen! Killed by Bhima!" The news spread from mouth to mouth till it reached the ears of Karna

Pushing back the forces of the Chedis and Panchalas, and keeping an eye on the war-flag of Bhima, he arrived at the spot where his dead son lay The sight of the corpse made the Bow of Victory shake in his hands, the next instant it slipped from his grip and fell on the ground

"Prasena! Prasena!" he shouted and leapt down from his chariot Turning the body of his dead son face upwards, he cupped the dust-smeared countenance in his hands The tears that streamed down Karna's face washed away the clotted dust on his son's face A few of the burning tear drops mingled in the earth of Kurukshetra

He stood up, and gazed briefly at the sky The Kaurava corpse-bearers removed the limp lifeless body lying in the long straddling shadow of Karna's massive frame Karna firmly turned his back to face the bitter reality of life, to face the fact of this world of maya which ensnares warriors all the time and at every step in the noose of death He ran and leapt into his chariot with the speed of a tiger pouncing on the neck of an elephant The chariot wheels rattled forward The iron chains on the left wheel of the chariot were getting loose as a result of the friction generated by the bumpy drive over the small and large craters on the battlefield But Karna

had no time to pay attention to this. His eyes, emitting the fire of his wrath, sought Bhima, and Bhima only. Shalya's whip cracked repeatedly on the sun-glistening backs of the white chariot-horses.

A tremendous battle was raging in the left corner of the battle-field between his eldest son Vrishasena and Nakula. Even a Pandava like Nakula was unable to defeat Vrishasena. Fearlessly showing off his skill, Vrishasena singlemindedly used this opportunity of harassing Nakula. "I am Karna's son Vrishasena!" Teasing Nakula with these words, he kept the Pandava confused for a few hours with an incessant shower of arrows. Just as he had fled from Karna, Nakula had no option but to retreat from Vrishasena as well. He looked about desperately for help from any quarter. But he had no idea where Arjuna and the three other Pandavas were fighting. He blew soft, piteous calls on his conch for help. Immediately on hearing them, the mighty hero Satyaki rushed to give assistance. Satyaki was next in power after the Pandavas.

A gory duel followed between Satyaki and Vrishasena. In no time at all Satyaki rendered Vrishasena senseless with a poison-tipped arrow. The tired eldest son of Karna crashed in the chariot like a boulder falling down a hill. Duhshasana quickly removed the unconscious Vrishasena from the field. Not because he had any special love for Vrishasena, but because he wanted to be as far away from Bhima as possible.

Karna next pounced on the re-grouped remnants of the Chedi elephant force. The few surviving elephants ran helter-skelter across the field, trumpeting with uplifted trunks. The Pandava leaders Dhrishtadyumna, Uttamaujas, Satyaki and Yuyudhana were unable to withstand the fiery onslaught. Karna had become an irresistible and invincible force.

Crushing with his mace the four-fold armies of the Vasatyas, Nishadhas and Saindhavas, Bhima danced crazily across the field and screamed his challenge to Karna: "Where is Duhshasana? Where is he?"

Decimating the suicide squad of Samshaptakas under the command of Susharma, our chariot, the Nandighosha, had penetrated more than half of the Solar Formation of the Kauravas.

Only three brave heroes still roamed freely on the field of Kurukshetra, amid the chaotic war-cries that resounded at the foot of the Amina hill. The armies sent to fight them began retreating.

The field was filled with broken army ranks like swarms of bees. Like flocks of birds squabbling on fruit-laden trees in springtime, the warriors of both camps attacked each other indiscriminately. None except Karna and the Pandava heroes on their high chariots knew who was fighting who, and where.

10

Urged by desire to avenge his defeat, Yudhishthira once again faced Karna on the battlefield, supported this time by the Dravida and Nishadha forces. However, that mighty chariot-hero, incensed by the death of his son, at the very outset succeeded in felling two of Yudhishthira's flank protectors, Dandadhara and Chandradeva. Irritated by the inadequacy of his valour, Yudhishthira clashed furiously with Karna's chariot. Never in the seventeen days of battle had Yudhishthira been so wrathful.

Shouting "Son of a charioteer! Son of a charioteer!" he obscured Karna's chariot with a torrent of arrows.

"Useless, good-for-nothing Kshatriya!" Karna shouted and scattered the swarm of arrows in an instant.

Reaching into his quiver and selecting the required arrows by the smooth feel of their ends—*naracha*, snake-mouthed, kite-backed, *jihma*, *sanatparva*, grindstone-sharpened, *bastika*—he shot them at Yudhishthira with the ferocity of frost freezing a Himalayan hill. Satyaki and Yuyutsu sped to his help, but none was able to withstand the onslaught of the invincible Kaurava general, Karna.

Harassed by Karna's arrows, Yudhishthira, Satyaki and Yuyutsu climbed into the same chariot and again fled from the field. As he retreated, Yudhishthira shot an arrow that penetrated a vulnerable spot near Karna's ear. Not one of the three turned back to see if he had fallen unconscious or not. Karna dropped down, senseless.

Shalya removed the arrow from the head of Karna. He sprinkled a few drops of water from the leather-bag kept in the chariot, and Karna revived after a few moments. The passion for war that glowed on his face had not faded the least bit—nor was it likely to fade.

Having fled from Karna on the battlefield, Yudhishthira went and cooped himself up silently in his tent. Fearing that he was

wounded, Arjuna's worry made his aim erratic Until he could be certain that Yudhishthira was unharmed, his mind would not stabilise Slowing down the speed of the Nandighosha chariot, I tried to manoeuvre it out of the field I halted the vehicle in front of Yudhishthira's tent The clatter of the chariot wheels made Yudhishthira come out of his tent He thought that his dear brother Arjuna had arrived to give the news that he had killed Karna who was wreaking such havoc in the Pandava ranks

The very instant Arjuna with bent head said that he had not even come face to face with Karna on the battlefield, Yudhishthira, famed for his equanimity, quailed

"Why don't you throw the Gandiva in Kurukshetra's Surya Pit?" No sooner had Yudhishthira angrily uttered these words than Arjuna, lifting his Gandiva bow, pounced on his eldest brother whom he had respected all his life almost like a father Arjuna was filled with a burning anger that surpassed even the anger of Ashvatthaman attacking Karna

There are some occasions which seem to be perfect tests of the limits of a man's self control Such an occasion now presented itself before Yudhishthira and Arjuna

I stepped between the two sons of Kunti and pacified them "I will not turn in the direction of my tent without first killing Karna " Taking this fierce vow, Arjuna re-ascended his chariot I smiled to myself As always

On the field itself battled Karna and Satyaki Experienced Satyaki and undefeated Karna collided like two masses of black clouds driven by strong winds from the east In the sixteen days of battle so far, Satyaki had remained undefeated He was the unpiercable defence of the Pandavas But today Karna humbled Satyaki whom even Bhishma and Drona had failed to vanquish

Nakula, Sahadeva and Dhrishtadyumna encircled Duryodhana Each throw of the war-dice turned against him but, straight and tall like the wild *keora*-tree, arrogant Duryodhana rolled his wide-open eyes and determinedly fought with his three antagonists Recalling the agony of victimised Draupadi, and determined to revenge the insult to his sister, Dhrishtadyumna rushed at Duryodhana with two upraised swords like the bared fangs of a hunted beast In a flash he leapt up and gashed the neck of the charioteer Pratikaman and, with Duryodhana as target, he kept circling the chariot That very instant, the person responsible for

the universal doom, that mighty banyan-huge arrogant Duryodhana began blowing his conch to signal Karna for assistance, because Karna was the only one he could fall back on. Since he had given word to protect Duryodhana to the last, the firm-vowed hero of charities immediately turned away from Satyaki in order to help his benefactor. All eight mighty chariot-heroes who had turned up to prevent his coming together with Duryodhana on the battlefield—Vyaghraketu, Susharma, Chitra, Ugragudha, Jaya, Shukla, Rochaman, and Singhasena—were despatched by Karna to the other world.

His white chariot steeds galloped so swiftly that they appeared to be a never-ending strip of white cloth. One instant he had covered the area from east to west; the other instant from south to north—he traversed the field like the king of birds Garuda soaring freely in the sky.

In the gory clash that was taking place around Duryodhana, he uncharioted the great heroes Jishnu, Jishnukarma, Devapi and Danda. The Pandava warriors had no idea where Karna would strike next and when. His arrows sped unobstructed like flocks of birds migrating over the sea in autumn. He was the complete master of five slaves: speed, strength, shape, impact, direction. He approached with a great clatter of chariot-wheels like a desert storm. Body bleeding with innumerable wounds, like the Gairika hill streaming in the monsoon with red liquid flowing from crimson stone-clusters, he pushed ahead. The beads of sweat from his shorn ears mixed with the blood from the wounds on his body. They streamed off the chariot and dripped on the field of Kurukshetra. Even though Karna's forehead was bathed in sweat while he rained arrows at his foes, Shalya refused to believe that he was the finest Kshatriya of them all. Shouting "Son of a charioteer! Son of a charioteer!" he kept asking for instructions in which direction to attack. Karna's muscular arms moved faster and faster in relation to the rise of the ascending sun.

The sun was now directly overhead. The disproportionate slanting shadows of the warriors were now perpendicular. Unable to endure the intense heat of the sun, wounded soldiers dragged themselves to shelter under half-smashed chariots. The severed tails of horses and sliced elephant trunks lying in that bubbling bog of flesh and blood, and soldiers flailing their legs and arms testified to life's extraordinary powers of survival. Karna had decimated the Pandava ranks.

Taking with him Vrishasena, who had recovered his senses, Duhshasana plunged into the confused ocean of the Kaurava army like a swift river, and reached the spot where he should not have—where a tumultuous battle was being fought between Duryodhana, Karna and Shakuni on one side and Bhima, Nakula, Sahadeva and Dhrishtadyumna on the other Like a black deer going to drink water in front of a lion

Like a mongoose puffing up the hair on its body and screeching and leaping angrily when facing a venomous snake, Bhima swelled his chest and leapt in his chariot when he confronted Duhshasana, and uttered a sky-rending scream Such a harsh and piercing scream that all the warriors, perplexed, froze, weapons in hand, wondering what had happened Even Bhima's sturdy, sweat covered russet horses, stunned by that fearful noise, bent their knees and abruptly sat on the ground His charioteer, Vishoka, alighted from the vehicle, caressed them, and somehow or other succeeded in getting them on their feet again As a result of his incessant wine-drinking, Bhima's red-rimmed eyes had become even more red And when he saw Duhshasana in front of him, the blood coursing even faster in his veins made them even more frightfully red The hairs on his thick moustache became stiff His large nostrils flared Beads of sweat glistened on his face, round as a water-pot Steeling his large jaw, he shouted, "Stop, you low-born scum!"

Inflamed Bhima totally forgot that he was a vulnerable target for the variegated weapons in the chariots of Karna, Shakuni, Kripa, and Ashvatthaman Pushing aside Vishoka, he took the reins in his own hands

Indiscriminately crushing under his chariot the Kauravas as well as many of his own ranks, he reached Duhshasana in no time at all Because his mind was fixed on revenge, Vayu's son Bhima let loose an explosive peal of laughter The cruelty in that laugh numbed Duhshasana's hands and feet *Best to escape if possible from an avalanche of rocks*—thinking this, Duhshasana curled up his body in his chariot like a hawk folding its wings in its nest Like a leaning tower somehow standing up against a battering storm—such was the condition of Duhshasana The same Duhshasana who, after the post-gambling disrobing of Draupadi, had neighed like a wild horse was now cowering for shelter like a wild cat No Kaurava soldier nearby had the courage to block Bhima, who

charged on Duhshasana like a bull in an open field. Bhima's entire frame was now like a veritable cyclone. Screaming "Lowborn Duhshasana!" he dashed straight into Duhshasana's chariot.

Duhshasana gripped his chariot's firm flagpole. He was in no mood to alight. Bhima dragged him out.

Duhshasana had dragged out Draupadi from the midst of the royal ladies. Now, from the midst of the Kaurava warriors, hugely powerful Bhima dragged Duhshasana out of his chariot, like a burly peasant dragging away by the neck a bull that has intruded into a field of ripe corn. Furious Bhima kicked on top of him the mace that had rolled down from his chariot. Bewildered Duhshasana managed somehow to endure the assault.

A horripilating mace-duel commenced. Sparks flew from the clashing maces. Sparks of anger scattered from their wrathful eyes that glared death at each other. Keenly eyeing each other to find a fatal spot, briefly pausing, carefully lifting each foot, they struck mace against mace, like the crackle of lightning, whenever they got the chance. Duhshasana attacked first, crouching to pounce like a cheetah. But he did not know that Bhima, who looked so huge and bulky, could become even more swift than wind-vibrations as soon as he heard the swish of a mace.

For half an hour they were oblivious of the existence of lakhs of warriors on the field of Kurukshetra

Finally Bhima felled him to the ground with a shattering blow. Immoral, huge-bodied Duhshasana dropped like a thorny cotton tree uprooted by a storm. Bhima flung aside his mace, sprinted forward, screaming, and with both hands gripped Duhshasana's mace-hand tightly. He stamped his heavy right foot, as large as an elephant's, on the right arm of Duhshasana. At that time he looked like the fearsome Dwarf Avatara of Vishnu pressing his foot on the third world. The mace fell from Duhshasana's hand.

Bhima twisted Duhshasana's arm at the shoulder before wrenching it off. "This very instant I will fling into the sky this sinful arm that dared to touch Draupadi's pure body!" Closing his eyes, and screaming, that hugely-powerful mace-hero, with one swift jerk, uprooted Duhshasana's arm from the shoulder-blade, like a Kirata tribal wrenching out a creeper from the soil. Maddened, he looked up skywards and, whirling that variously-ornamented wicked arm, hurled it in the far distance like a mace that's hurled at a warrior. All the soldiers on the field horripilated.

But that was not enough to satisfy the rage of Bhima who was not in control of himself He picked up the mace that had slipped from Duhshasana's hand Lifting it high, he brought it down in a devastating blow at agonising Duhshasana's chest The chest was pulped like an ant-heap crushed under a musth elephant's foot Fountains of blood spirted, tears gushed forth Horripilating cries broke out all over

Flinging aside the mace, Bhima knelt on the ground "Come, try and stop this king of the forest from drinking the blood of this wild beast " He shouted this to the Kaurava warriors assembled near and far Duryodhana, Shakuni, Kripa, Ashvatthaman, and Karna His red eyes emitted sparks of anger even more than theirs

Like a thirsty lion thrusting his muzzle in a stream near a ghat, Bhima thrust his round lion like face in the flowing blood in Duhshasana's chest and, shaking Duhshasana's massive body back and forth, he gulped warm mouthfuls of blood as if he was drinking *maireyaka* wine from a barrel Everyone's hackles rose

They covered their eyes with their hands Many fainted My hands, which held the Nandighosha chariot reins, remained steady

The intoxication of Duhshasana's blood went to Bhima's head even more powerfully than *maireyaka* wine Flailing his blood drenched arms he ran from the battlefield to the tents, shouting "Draupadi! Draupadi! ' Early in the morning he had arranged to bring Draupadi to his tent He was ready to fulfil his gruesome vow of smearing the black tresses of Draupadi with Duhshasana's blood He was going to dress her thick, long black hair, which since the incident of the disrobing she had kept untied, he was ready now, after so many years, to personally comb her hair With wrathful Bhima's departure from the battlefield, the soldiers standing nearby heaved a sigh of relief

11

Impossible now to predict what could happen—and how—on the field of battle Impossible to tell when the instinctive emotions of fear, cruelty and bravery would explode The *yajna*-pit of war was now transformed into an all consuming holocaust

Bhima, Karna, Arjuna—these three alone had despatched lakhs of warriors to the realm of Yama Even a glimpse of any of these three sent soldiers scurrying away in confusion

Every minute saw the squelchy filthy mess of blood and flesh slipping under the feet of horses, elephants and chariot-wheels, and sliding in the low-lying region of the south, where a coagulated bog had already formed. No charioteer, however expert, was willing to drive in that direction.

On the right, the battle between Nakula and Karna's son Vrishasena had reached its peak, with neither warrior acknowledging defeat.

After adorning Draupadi's hair, Bhima returned to battle with Karna.

As soon as they saw each other, they clashed like two rutting elephants competing for a she-elephant on Shatashringa hill. Both were incomparably skilled, expert in war, fearless and fearsome. Karna's golden skin shone like sunrays. Bhima's blood-red complexion glowed like a blossoming flame-of-the-forest. They pounced on each other like two mighty rivers colliding from opposite directions. Bhima's mind bore a grudge on account of Ghatotkacha. Karna's mind rankled with the memory of the incident in the arena regarding the whip and Bhima's slaughter of his son.

Like meteors colliding mid-sky, they attacked each other. Spears, javelins, chakras, maces, swords—they used whatever they could lay hands on, with an eye on striking any exposed fatal spot. Karna had many opportunities of shooting life-consuming arrows at Bhima. But he deliberately refrained from aiming at any place other than Bhima's muscular arms and thighs. Off and on, wounded severely, they lost consciousness. Inhaling reviving herbal drugs placed in their nostrils through hollow reeds by their charioteers, they sprang up like lions waking as if from sleep and recommenced their weapons' duel. None had the courage to enter their orbit of battle. For an hour or so, these two mighty warriors fought tirelessly like two mighty planets. Neither would admit defeat. The sparks never stopped emitting from their clashing steel weapons. The sharp, thorny duel, it seemed, would never end.

In the meantime Ashvatthaman raced his chariot until it faced Karna. "Raja of Anga, your son Vrishasena is trapped like a helpless sea-cow in the arrow-net of Arjuna. Run! Help him!" Without once looking back, adjusting his headgear that was flapping in the wind, Karna dashed to Vrishasena's rescue. A

dozen or so of Duryodhana's brothers who had survived pushed ahead and engaged Bhima, allowing Karna to proceed on his mission.

Somehow or other, Shalya succeeded in manoeuvring the chariot through the blood-filled bog in the southern region and brought it near the Pandavas who had surrounded Vrishasena, in the extreme southern tip.

The battlefield was now divided into two clear areas—the north with Bhima, Satyaki, Dhrishtadyumna, Sahadeva, Yudhishthira and their Kaurava opponents, the brothers of Duryodhana, Kripa, the Raja of Sindhu; and the south with Vrishasena, Ashvatthaman, Shakuni, Duryodhana and, surrounding them with Vrishasena as target, Arjuna, Nakula, Uttamaujas and others. In the second part, from the foot of the Amina hill to the ring around Vrishasena, was the bog of flesh and blood, where nothing moved.

Eager to rescue his son from Arjuna's arrow-net, Karna with great difficulty reached the ring around his son. By this time, Arjuna who had challenged Shakuni, Ashvatthaman and Duryodhana, approached Karna and said: "Son of a charioteer, I will kill your son Vrishasena in front of all of you today. Just as you killed my beloved son Abhi." He shot a moon-shaped arrow which severed the head of Vrishasena who looked like a proud antelope shrouded in the earlier arrow-swarm.

Countless warriors bit their tongues. The eldest son of Karna, Vrishasena, toppled.

The Pandava army blew a peal of trumpets behind us. Realising that it was not advisable to face Arjuna, the frightened Kaurava warriors became totally demoralised.

Seeing Vrishasena fall, Karna for the first time in his life lowered his head. Shalya halted his chariot near Vrishasena's corpse. Karna flung aside his bow and alighted. Like a lion shorn of his mane. Even that great hero was unable to prevent warm tears streaming from his blue eyes. He lifted Vrishasena's head. The hands that offered *arghya* worship to the Sun, the hands that donated liberally to supplicants and mendicants, the hands that lifted the Vijaya bow high today cradled the severed lotus-head of his beloved son, the focus of all his life's hopes and longings.

As he attached the head to Vrishasena's trunk, the son of Surya lost faith in love which was nourished so long by life's hopes and expectations. He stood up, totally renouncing, as it were, all the

deceitful affections of the world, all the high and low caste divisions, and all ego-ridden ambitions

Sobbing, he did *pradakshina* round his son's corpse His body was now a mass of fire No ties of any kind could now awaken tenderness in him Neither fame nor affection could now influence him He had only one kinship now—with the limitless, endless, infinite blue sky, and with the blazing brightly Sun

He bent low once more and smelt the crown of Vrishasena's head He rose, and let out a sky-rending roar "Atta-a-a-c-k!"

12

Fleeing from the onslaught of Arjuna, the Kaurava warriors suddenly stopped where they were, as stiff as nails They stopped, with the intention of attacking the Pandavas with renewed enthusiasm

Regrouping the survivors of the Kaurava army, Karna advanced towards our Nandighosha chariot like an ocean wind The third part of the day had begun I halted the Nandighosha at a strategic spot where Shalya would not be able to manoeuvre his chariot without driving through the southern blood and-flesh bog Clever Shalya circled the fringe of the bog to determine if there was a four-cubit patch of dry ground anywhere in that swampy mass Finally, he said in desperation to Karna "Son of Radha, today is not the right time to battle with Arjuna I sense danger in trying to drive through this bog "

Karna laughed, and kept laughing Without a word, he pointed a finger as an order to drive through the centre of the bog

Our chariot now faced theirs

Descending from the chariot I smeared a thick layer of grease on its wheels Supposing we had to enter the bog while chasing his chariot? At least the thick grease would prevent us getting stuck in the coagulated blood bones-and flesh of the bog I climbed back into the Nandighosha holding the wooden grease box Replacing the box in the hemp net, I picked up the whip

The excited warriors of both armies took the snapped and crushed garlands from their chariots and showered the petals with victory shouts on their respective commanders One threw a sun-flower garland accurately around the neck of Karna I removed my

blue lotus garland from my neck and from where I stood I placed it round Arjuna's blue neck Today was my testing time as well Yes, the acid test

The acid test was Should I see to it that the first son of Kunti—the most idealistic of idealistic persons—was kept alive, or should I be more practical and save the lives of the five Pandava brothers? I was on the side of being practical, because if Arjuna fell all the other four brothers would certainly fall too

When I pummelled my maternal uncle Kansa to death, my arms did not tremble or waver My heart didn't palpitate when I meted out punishment to Dantavakra, Viduratha, Shrigala, Shalva and Paundraka My eyes did not get moist when I released my Sudarshana chakra at my cousin Shishupala But today today I could feel clearly the reins of the Nandighosha quivering, as it were, in my grip Because because I knew that though, as a result of his cruel humiliation, that hero of charities at times had bitterly antagonised Bhishma, Arjuna, Bhima and even Draupadi, still for me he had a deep, unshakeable bhakti, which I had experienced at the time of our meeting when uncontrollable tears from his eyes dropped on the runnel of my blue-skinned back I knew fully well the silent relationship between him and the mother-like Rajmata Kunti Devi There were only four people in my life for whom I had silent bhakti brimful of love and sacrifice my mother Devaki, the Queen Mother Kunti Devi, Karna, and Radha of Gokula

To still the whirlpool of my thoughts, I blew very loudly into my conch the Panchajanya

Slapping their strong sandal paste smeared arms, nostrils flaring, Karna and Arjuna sounded their conches The nearby hill trembled at the noise of the war trumpets of both armies They faced each other like two high, white peaks of the Himalayas Their piercing pupils focused on each other's arms, trying to anticipate from the slightest movement of the opponent's hand which arrow he would be nocking The commingled noise of various war instruments—tabors, trumpets, long drums, kettle-drums and tomtoms—rent the sky Karna closed his eyes for an instant and chanted a shloka to the Sun Arjuna closed his eyes also and murmured a shloka in my worship Placing the conches in their wooden holds, they readied themselves for weapons-combat

Peace for only an instant—and the next moment they roared with ear-splitting ferocity and loosed terrifying showers of arrows at each other Their arrows shot through the sky and it seemed to the warriors of both armies that the sky with all its constellations of stars was disintegrating above their heads Even I had not witnessed in the last sixteen days such a heart-shattering arrow-shower The duel between these two warriors was infinitely more cataclysmic than the clashes of Bhishma, Drona, and Abhimanyu All were stunned with wonder

Their arrows were as countless as swarms of insects Like multi-coloured horses galloping freely out of stables as soon as the gates are opened, the arrows shot out of the bow-strings instantaneously, it seemed Countless warriors fell victim to the sharp arrows Both armies began diminishing, like melting Himalayan snows in summer

Like lakhs of pure-white swans swooping into the sky when a snow peak cracks and falls into Lake Manasarovara, their pure-white *jihma* shafts sped swiftly from their massive bows Twisting, screeching, zig-zagging, they collided with each other, and the sky was radiantly illuminated with the star-bright sparks that were emitted

Hundreds and thousands of *kapisha*-arrows shot in the sky rained like the Mriga constellation on their enemies Shooting white, lightning-like, zig-zagging *jihma* arrows at each other's army leaders, they started decimating the armies The soldiers were utterly at a loss regarding where the arrows were coming from Their arrows emerged like ants from an ant-hill Their countless dusky *kapisha*-arrows sped like flocks of Garuda-birds swirling away at the crackle of lightning from the ridges of the Shatashringa mountain on which they perch with sharp-taloned claws In an instant the entire sky was shrouded, and Kurukshetra quaked

In order to incapacitate Karna's charioteer, Arjuna shot, above my head, swarms of arrows in the direction of his chariot steeds But but Shalya was a truly brilliant driver With a flick of the reins, he was making the five steeds bend knees and sit, and as suddenly making them leap as high as the base of the chariot's flag-pole And at times he turned the heavy weapons-loaded chariot driven by the five huge horses so swiftly that Arjuna's arrows missed their target and, thudding against the steel casing of the rear of the chariot, sizzled in a shower of angry sparks in the bog

All around the chariot the messy blood-and-gristle became even more squelchy and unmanoeuvrable To inspire and encourage their commanders, the nearby soldiers, taking their names, voiced continuous victory-cries The victory-shouts were becoming more and more sky-rending For an hour the furious antagonists hurled arrow-torrents at each other The steel mail on their bodies flattened the sharp points of arrows But warm blood flowed in a steady stream from their wounded arms They hadn't even the time to staunch their loss of blood The blood of these two was sweetly familial, but Karna was too agitated now even to be aware of the relationship

Seeing hundreds of Matsya, Panchala, Saindhava and Gandhara warriors drop like ripe fruit of the *audumbara*-tree, the soldiers of both armies held back their weapons They left the entire battlefield to the two opponents, and stood still as mute spectators, witnessing the doom-duel with wide-open eyes

The two heroes now prepared to attack each other with their life precious, divinely acquired weapons Even if the Queen Mother Kunti Devi, who had given them birth, had turned up at the scene of battle now, she could not have surmised that they were blood brothers The two opponents were now as opposite as the two poles of the earth Each saw only one goal in front of him—the lifeless form of his opponent Each thirsted for that end only Each was oblivious of himself, totally so

From a golden quiver Karna drew out a celestial snake-mouthed arrow the tip of which had been dipped in sandal-powder, unknown to Karna, this arrow had been charged with shakti by a Naga serpent Aiming straight at Arjuna's neck, he intoned a mantra and released the dreadful shaft Arjuna had no inkling at all that the arrow was speeding towards him with the swiftness of wind, targeted at his neck

I jerked the reins dexterously, all five horses suddenly swerved, then sat down As a result, the fearful arrow aimed at Arjuna's neck sped over the lowered chariot and, clanging against Arjuna's golden coronet, knocked it off his head It rolled away noisily on the battlefield The helmet under the coronet turned askew and fell inside the chariot Arjuna breathed a sigh of relief His dark-blue curly hair floated free I glanced at him and laughed

Untying his pure-white silk waist-band, Arjuna wrapped it around his forehead The summons of Fate was now becoming more and more urgent

Shooting a volley of arrows like a waterfall of Gangotri, Arjuna trapped Karna's charioteer Shalya into immobility, like a hawk in a cage That expert charioteer was unable now to move in any direction The Jaitra-chariot was right in front now—and rooted to the ground

Karna's special arrows whizzed past my coronet like flocks of *dhanachari*-birds He was careful not to aim even by mistake a single arrow at me throughout the entire course of the horrendous battle

Harassed Arjuna adjusted his head-vesture and began intoning the prelude mantra to the shooting of the Agni-missile Invigorated, Arjuna stood erect, like a straight-blossoming *anjani*-tree A mysterious celestial radiance seemed to flow from his counten ance Like thousands of bright-red-tufted *karandava* birds sweeping down on the waters of the Drishadvati river, Arjuna's fire-arrows swooshed out of his Gandiva bow past my head, spitting flame as they sought their target The Kaurava soldiers fled, fearing that the entire cosmos had become a massive all consuming *yajna*-pit Many fainted, struck by the weird fear that the sun had melted and fallen on their bodies Arjuna's arrows rained molten fire

To frustrate Arjuna's fire-arrows, Karna knelt and, closing his eyes, intoned the mantras associated with the divine Varuna-arrows All the water of the *arghya*-offerings, which had trickled from his cupped hands, like a faithful servant now rushed to his aid in the form of dark clouds charged with doom-dancing lightning He selected deadly arrows backed with leather-feathers as large as elephant's ears, and shot them in such thick clusters that they blocked the free flow of wind on Kurukshetra In a second masses of black clouds ringed the battlefield Arjuna's flaming wrath, the source of his shooting his fire-arrows, was extinguished, together with the arrows, by torrential rain and thunder The great hero of charities, Karna, brought life back to half-dead wounded soldiers with his gift of rain

But but he was unaware of the fact that, as a result of the downpour brought about by his own Varuna-missiles, the bog around his chariot was becoming even more swampy

To disperse the rain-clouds created by Karna's Varuna-missiles, Arjuna resorted to a skilful use of his Wind missiles Whistling as they sped swiftly to their targets, the Wind missiles pierced and

disintegrated the cloud-masses. The sun's rays shone once again on Kurukshetra. Arjuna's Wind-missiles flew away with the flags and pennants of the war-chariots as if they were playthings. Ecstatic, Arjuna raised his victory-cry and, intoning the mantra associated with the Lightning-missile, he hurled the weapon which sped towards Karna with countless sharp arrows. Noticing the various strange multi-shaped weapons rushing towards him, Karna, completely unfazed, countered with the Bhargava-weapon which he had obtained on Mahendra hill. The celestial, all-destroying weapons of both the missiles collided noisily, scattering on the ground in a shower of sparks.

Arjuna fired the all-consuming Brahma-missile. Karna blocked it with great skill; not only that, he succeeded in shredding with his infallible arrows the flag on our Nandighosha chariot. He was aiming his arrows at our wheels. They pierced our chariot. Both warriors used all manner of weapons at each other—the bow, the noose, the javelin, the *bhindipala*, the chakra, the three-pronged lance. Neither seemed to tire. The battle was inconclusive. The third part of the day ended and the sun began its decline in the west.

Even more fearful than the duels between Indra and Bali, Nahusha and Indra, and Jarasandha and Bhima, was the battle between Arjuna and Karna. A blood-curdling spectacle! A duel gaining in intensity every moment!

Over the entire battlefield spread a shroud of countless arrows—*nishitha*, *naracha*, *jihma*, *sanmataparva*, *kanka-punkha*, *bastika*, *rukmapunkha*, and *kshura*. Though Karna and Arjuna had no intention of killing them, countless warriors died as a result of the celestial barrage. Both armies could now be numbered in thousands only—such was the frightful massacre done by both. Neither retreated. Neither tired, even for an instant. This battle of a single day was even more gory than the battles of the past sixteen days.

Finally, Karna hurled at Arjuna the Atharvan-missile which he had obtained from Parashurama on Mahendra hill after great hardship. To evade that weapon, I made the horses turn swiftly full-circle, as a result of which the Nandighosha chariot slipped about twenty cubits backwards and landed in the bog. Which was the reason I had smeared grease on the chariot-wheels. The Atharvan-missile missed its target.

Shalya bit his lips when he saw the back of our chariot facing him, and attempted to manoeuvre, but he was immobilised in a cage of arrows Nonetheless, he kept urging the horses by flicking his reins on their backs The horses dug in their hooves and tried to turn the chariot with all their strength, but but the chariot did not move so much as an inch It was not going to move at all now

For about half an hour the chariot remained embedded in the slush The bloody slush around its wheels thickened in the heat of the sun, and the earth seemed to grip the chariot hard The Sun did not want to witness any further humiliation of his son Did he intend to take him away to his Eternal Resting Place?

Fatigued Shalya advised Karna to throw away all the heavy weapons in the chariot—all except the arrows and quivers—and started flinging them out himself Foaming at the mouths, the chariot steeds struggled to find hoof-holds in the slippery bog, but the vehicle did not move even a jot The left wheel of the chariot was inextricably stuck, like a lost bull bogged in a marsh on Mahendra hill

I manoeuvred the Nandighosha in circular mandalas around Karna's chariot, even as he continued shooting arrows

"Raja of Anga, the chariot is not moving even an inch The left wheel is totally enveloped in the earth," Shalya shouted in fear

"Do not worry, king of Madra I will pull out the chariot-wheel " Holding steady the quiver on his back and the swift-and-contin- uous shooting Vijaya Bow in his hand, he alighted from his chariot—descending like the sun in the west

A whirl of thoughts filled my mind He descending from the chariot

Son of a charioteer, Raja of Anga, Commander-in-Chief, world-conqueror, hero of charities, the invincible bowman Karna—or the son of Kunti the first Pandava?

He thrust his right hand under a spoke of the left wheel, gathered his entire strength to jerk the chariot free The rippling ligaments on his muscular arms bulged Drops of sweat appeared on his forehead He jerked, but the wheel refused to budge The spoke snapped in his hand

Seeing the bow still in Karna's grip, Arjuna kept shooting arrows which pierced his bare arms He sat on the ground He pushed his bow as far deep into the earth as it would go, and stood it firm and erect, and adopted the sit-and shoot posture

With his left hand he removed the arrows from his quiver and with one hand nocked them on his Vijaya bow. Holding the bowstring firmly between his clenched teeth, he pulled it back with all his strength and shot the arrows accurately at Arjuna. With his right hand he tried to free the wheel with all his might. Two or three more spokes broke apart but the wheel remained stuck, not moving an inch. With one hand he fixed an arrow that rendered Arjuna unconscious. Seeing this, he placed his Vijaya bow on the ground and, thrusting both hands in the slush, he tried with full force to pull out the wheel.

This was the only time since that morning that the bow was not in his hands. Just for a brief moment. A momentous moment. And if this moment passed, then—then...

I placed a reed tube filled with herbal medicines near Arjuna's nose. In a flash he revived and stood up.

Seeing Karna unarmed, Arjuna also laid aside his Gandiva bow, since a defenceless opponent could not be attacked.

In the courtyard of my mind raced thoughts, like herds of cows brushing against each other's flanks in the pasturage of Gokula. I kept flicking the reins of the five Nandighosha steeds incessantly on their backs. No plan suggested itself to my mind. A momentous moment, otherwise... that sky-vast hero would free the wheel and attack us again.

I held five reins, but only one whip. One—or five? Reins or the whip? The whip or the reins? Five, or one? Ah, nothing made *sense! And then, suddenly, a shining thought* came to me. An eminently practical idea. Eminently incontestable.

Reins stop horses, whips make them gallop. Instantly I thrust the whip in my right hand in its tiger-skin case attached to the chariot, and flicked the reins. Pointing the forefinger of my right hand at volcano-like Karna who was struggling to release his chariot wheel, I said to Arjuna, "Arjuna, select an *anjalika* half-moon arrow."

"But...he's defenceless. He's standing on the ground, and I am inside a chariot," Arjuna demurred.

"This is an order, Arjuna." My voice was sharp and harsh. I frowned.

Obedient Arjuna swiftly pulled out an *anjalika* arrow from his quiver. He tested the tautness of the bowstring by twanging it once. Hearing that faint twang, Karna instantly turned to look at

us. Seeing Arjuna preparing to aim at him, he waved his left hand furiously and shouted, "Arjuna, wait! I am unarmed. I am standing on the ground. It is against the dharma of a chariot-warrior to attack an unarmed opponent on the ground. You are a hero, a Kshatriya." He was surely trying to concentrate his mental energies to recall the *mantra of the* Brahma-missile which he had obtained on Mahendra hill. But he was unable to do so.

I knew that he was totally unafraid of dying. He had desired with all his heart to obtain the Brahma-missile and, after obtaining it, all he looked forward to was death. But even that was now not in his fate. This was hardly fair... and in any case it was not possible.

His touching appeal put Arjuna in a dilemma. Disturbed, he allowed the bow in his hands to droop. There was no doubt of it, he was in two minds. His lips again became dry.

It was futile now to grant Karna even one more second of life... because... no one after this would ever know the facts of his life, the legitimacy of his birth. Therefore, in order to make Arjuna's mind firm, I had again to instil in Arjuna the importance of practical wisdom. I had to take the very principles of the warrior's dharma that Karna was stressing and, applying them to Karna by reminding Arjuna of past incidents, I had to steel Arjuna's mind. I had to transform vacillating and perplexed Arjuna into a mountain as firm as Sumeru. A veritable Yamuna of language began flowing from my lips like a fierce resistless flood.

"Dharma! What do you know at all of dharma, son of Radha? Son of a charioteer, what happened to your sublime dharma when, in the ancient assembly hall of the Kauravas, you described Draupadi as a prostitute? Where did your dharma disappear when you saw Kunti-devi leave barefoot in forest-exile with her five Pandava sons? Why didn't your dharma protest when you heard that the Pandavas had been burnt to ashes in the lacquer house? And, son of a charioteer, why didn't you recall this same dharma when the six of you surrounded and butchered the sixteen-year old boy Abhimanyu? Take aim, *Arjuna!" I pointed my forefinger* straight at Karna's throat.

Even then he smiled. He joined both palms. Not in supplication before anyone; but simply to offer me reverence. I... only I could understand this. His last obeisance on the field of battle—flowing from his silent eyes.

The *anjalika* shaft sped out of Arjuna's twanging bow and, slicing through the coat of mail that covered Karna's neck, embedded itself with a swish near his throat, half-piercing it That mighty chariot-hero slumped in the slush beside the wheel The Vijaya Bow fell at a far distance In the confusion of pulling out the stuck wheel, his shawl had been splattered with filth The shredded rope of the left wheel snapped as he tugged at it in pathetic agony The chariot-wheel broke off from the hub "Karna is wounded! Karna has fallen!" As soon as the news reached their ears, the soldiers of both armies laid down their weapons The news was unbelievable Each soldier asked his fellow-soldier, "What's happened? What is going on?"

Only I knew what anguish I passed through when I addressed him at the end as "Son of a charioteer", in order to implement a very difficult decision I dropped the reins All the walls of principles created for the orderly functioning of society crashed

Blindly, I jumped off my chariot and ran towards his mangled body, hands uplifted, shouting, "Son of Radha!" Ashwatthaman, who loved him more than life itself, was already beside him Hearing the news of his fall, Duryodhana fainted He ordered the cessation of the battle, and fell down in his chariot, like a crumbling embankment

Ashvatthaman and five massive-bodied warriors took the wounded body of their commander and placed it on dry ground near a tent Blood gushed from his neck and daubed his armour

His half-closed blue eyes stared fixedly at the blue sky The instant Ashvatthaman brought his face near, Karna, with great effort, opened his eyes "Son of my guru " Gazing at the head band of Ashvatthaman, he spoke haltingly His lips fluttered

The fact that Ashvatthaman, forgetting everything, had rushed to his side, made Karna so happy that no words came to his lips Ashvatthaman read his mind Quickly untying the knot of the head-band under his chin, he flung the cloth on the dusty ground On his head was a red flesh-gem he was born with—similar to Karna's flesh-ear-rings With the exception of these two, none other possessed such divine birth-gifts.

Suddenly lifting the right hand of the dying hero, Ashvatthaman tearfully placed it on his flesh gem As soon as the celestial gem touched him, he remembered his own flesh-ear-rings, which he

had gifted away. His blue eyes opened fully. Neither of the two warriors spoke a word. The tears of Ashvatthaman mixed with Karna's tears. I could clearly see some of the rain-drops on the banks of far-away Drishadvati gleaming like dew-drops—remnants of the rain that was created by his employment of the Varuna-missile. Shimmering drops of dew...drops that would dissipate in the earth the instant a wind began blowing.

Yudhishthira, Arjuna, the three other Pandavas, and other warriors had surrounded him so thickly that not even an ant could slip through.

His son Chitrasena sat beside with tear-filled eyes. All were benumbed. His eyes, briefly opening and closing, surveyed them all, seeking perhaps to spot Duryodhana. He could not see Duryodhana anywhere near.

The moment he noticed me, even in that terrible state, a faint smile appeared on his face. With an intense effort, he opened his eyes fully. Slowly taking his heavy-feeling hands to his head, he removed the crown and shakily placed it at my feet.

I had myself made Ashvatthaman place that crown on Karna's head when I had seen him sitting crownless in the pavilion of the Rajasuya Yajna. And now he, in the same silent way, had offered the crown at my feet—with boundless bhakti.

I stooped and picked up the crown at my feet. My eyes brimmed with tears for the first time. Now he had no rights to that crown. With my yellow garment, I dusted the crown. Seeing this, the Pandavas and all the other warriors were wonder-struck. What did they know? How could they ever know?

Peace descended on all quarters. Holding back his tears, Chitrasena poured holy water from the sacred rivers in Karna's mouth. Holding his breath, he swallowed the water through his half-sliced throat in terrible pain. Standing deathly still, all looked at him. The devotee who offered *arghya* in the waters of the Ganga was now himself drinking the holy water of the Ganga.

13

"*Arre*, is there any hero of charities left in this world today?" It was a shaky, elderly voice, piercing the total stillness of the area. All turned their faces in extreme surprise.

An elderly Brahmin had discovered his son's corpse on the battlefield But he was so alone and poor that he did not have enough money even to perform the last samskaras Wailing piteously, he had traversed the entire battlefield, with open wrinkled hands, begging for anything he could get from any living or wounded soldiers It seemed that all humaneness had been consumed in the conflagration of war no soldier listened to his supplications Noticing a crowd, he had come hopefully to where we were gathered Because he had no idea who lay dying, he was shouting from the edge of the crowd

"*Arre*, is there any hero of charities left in this world today?" His neck was trembling The staff in his hand was shaking The instant his feeble, quavering words reached the semi-conscious ears of Karna, Karna's sensitive soul responded with deep feeling His entire body throbbed in an extraordinary manner He overcame even the disability of his wounded neck Looking at Chitrasena, he said with amazing clarity, "Ch-i t-ra-a-s-e-n-a—s-u-p-p-l-i-c-a n-t "

Immediately Chitrasena stood up, rushed to the Brahmin on the edge of the crowd and, holding his hand, guided him to Karna The old man's grey-and-white hair was dishevelled His eyes were set deep in his wrinkled face His neck wobbled

"Tell me, Brah-m-i-n, boon de-s-i-r-e " The fatally wounded commander's lips quivered when he saw the old man with outstretched hands

Seeing the blood spurting from the mighty hero's neck, the Brahmin forgot his own son's death, and said humbly, "Nothing, Raja of Anga, nothing " That old man had been granted many boons earlier by Karna What could he possibly ask now from dying, forlorn Karna?

It was this moment, this very moment which I could have used to disclose the identity of the first Pandava to the other Pandavas standing around This was the moment when I could have highlighted worldly values to the Pandavas and divine values to Karna

I stepped forward and whispered in his ear, ' That old man is so poor that he does not have the wherewithal even to perform the last samskaras of his dead son That is why he is seeking a hero of charities '

"H e r-o of c h a r i t i e-s!" He mumbled inaudibly He quickly closed his eyes, began thrashing his arms and legs, and clenching

his fists helplessly. What could he possibly give the old man? It was an insoluble problem. The coat-of-mail on his chest started heaving rapidly.

What should he now do? His reputation as the hero of charities was in peril. Excepting for coats-of-mail and weapons, no warrior nearby possessed so much as a cracked bead. There were golden crowns left, but they were on the heads of the Pandavas.

His feet and hands suddenly stopped flailing. Something struck him, and he opened his half-closed eyes. They blazed with an unbelievable radiance.

"C-h-i-t-r-a-s-e-n-a! S-t-o-n-e!" He ordered Chitrasena, who rose and brought a stone from far. Seeing Chitrasena in front of him, his blue eyes gleamed with an indescribable, ineffable dazzle.

Concentrating all his shakti, he spoke rapidly, "Chitrasena... that stone... break my gold teeth... give to... old man ..." The strain made him pause. The agony produced by the arrow still embedded in his throat made him close his eyes tightly.

Chitrasena stood there, trembling violently. He dearly loved his father. Instead of offering flowers at the feet of his dying father, he was expected to break his father's teeth with a stone—how could he possibly do that? A strapping young man of twentyfive, trembling incontrollably. Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead.

"Chitrasena!" Karna's tone was harsh—like the clang of an arrow striking a steel coat-of-mail.

"You are... ordered... by the Kaurava... Commander... Chitr-s-e-n-a!" His voice had the ring of authority. No soldier could refuse to obey his command. The soldiers standing near could hardly believe their ears.

Their tear-filled eyes turned to Chitrasena. He was still trembling. The warrior who had fought like a lion all day on the field was shaking like a rabbit, rooted to one spot like a man bereft of his senses. Drops of sweat dripped from his brow on the stone he held in his hand.

"Chitra-s-e-n-a!" Karna's lips quivered. His eyes spewed fire. He gazed angrily at his son—as a commander gazes at a disobedient soldier.

Chitrasena sprang forward, as if struck by lightning. No matter what, he was after all the seed of Karna. Seeing Chitrasena approaching, Karna's eyes gleamed with joy. The next moment he

closed his eyes tightly, and clenched his fists, anticipating the unbearable agony that would suffuse his being when the tooth was broken—an agony exceeding the agony in his throat The skin around his half-closed eyes twitched He opened wide his serene mouth which so often chanted purifying mantras to the Sun-God—a mouth like a fully-blossomed sunflower His teeth, as symmetrically arranged as sunflower pistils, shone Two of them were made of gold, and they gleamed a yellow sparkle

Suppressing the intense emotion which rose in him, Chitrasena lifted the stone Many closed their eyes Something that had never happened on any battlefield was being enacted on Kurukshetra today

"Thud! Thud!" Two sounds were absorbed in the field of Kurukshetra Flinging away the stone, and thinking *My father would be upset by my uncontrollable sobbing*, Chitrasena sped like an arrow through the ring of warriors into the distance, as if drained of all energy

The teeth of the hero of charity broke and fell in his mouth The blood from his gums splashed and mingled with the blood from his wounded throat, and spilled drop by drop on the earth Tears flowed from the eyes of the assembled soldiers With great anguish he held the broken teeth in his hand His eyes radiated a strange glow A hollow began deepening in his mouth

Trembling, he said brokenly, "Brahmin, this gift this blood-smeared defiled gift how can I place it in your pure hands?" All who stood there horripilated in awe No one except I knew about his philosophy of life If by any chance anyone got to know, he would not have believed it

Once again he felt helpless, because he could think of no way to remove the bloodstains from the teeth From his eyes flowed an incessant stream of tears With tear-filled eyes he gazed briefly at his father who was setting in the sky above Amina hill Fixedly Unblinkingly

The next instant, a strange, profound, subtle flash of insight made him self-aware Throughout his life, he had dealt with everything with this unexplainable flash of insight

He held the teeth in his hands, allowing his tears to wash them He kept staring fixedly at the sun to let the tears flow continuously from his eyes Impossible even to imagine what fearful confusion must have gripped his mind at that time Even I lacked the imagination to do so

The blood on his teeth was washed clean by his tears The teeth gleamed brightly in the sun's rays Seeing this, his eyes glowed with joy and contentment

He picked one flower from the crushed tuberose wristlet and placed it on top of the teeth Lifting the gift-offering to his broad forehead, he smiled and raised his hand to gift the teeth to the supplicant That gift thus became perfectly in accordance with prescribed ritual

Many in this world have given gifts But but only the first born Pandava knew how to give, while at the very door of death a gift so heart shaking, so total so incomparable The eldest son of Kunti The son of Surya

From countless throats came the acclamation 'Blessed Karna! Blessed Karna!"

Trembling, the old Brahmin stepped forward Now there was no choice but to accept the gift With shaking hands he received the gift Grateful tears from his old eyes fell on the two gold teeth and the tuberose Karna tried to bow his head in order to pay homage to the elderly supplicant But the arrow in his throat prevented his doing so The old man could not contain himself, and shouted, "Hero of charities Karna! Blessed is the lady who gave you birth! And blessed is the earth that nourished your large-hearted, large-framed body! Hero of charities Karna, there has not been, nor will there ever be, such a dedicated donor in the whole of Aryavarta " His words were charged with pain

Neck shaking and eyes brimming with tears, the old man, carrying his unparalleled gift, made his way to where his son's corpse lay

Seeing him leave satisfied, that hero of charities, though at death's door, smiled faintly What was the meaning of that smile? Not all would be able to fathom it

The bow in Arjuna's hand and the mace on Bhima's shoulder started shaking Though they witnessed this incredible spectacle of physical endurance, it never occurred to them that Karna could not be the son of a charioteer

He was the son of Surya The son of Kunti The eldest brother, as excellent as the others But they were not aware of this

His wandering eyes were still searching for someone For Duryodhana

The instant he recovered consciousness, Duryodhana ran out, and sliced a path through the gathered soldiers even as a crocodile slices through water "Anga-Ra-a a-j-a!" he screamed as soon as he saw Karna For the first time in his life tears welled up in his eyes Eighty of his brothers had perished on the field, but he had not felt such grief even for them

Karna called Duryodhana to his side with his eyes He was now preparing to make the ultimate gift The last, magnificent gift The gift of his thoughts and ideas

"King when I die see that you order an end to the war" Seeing his lips quavering, all were stupefied Truly, there was an endless depth in this man

"No o-o-o! Raja of Anga! My friend! A mighty, illustrious hero like you gives his life for me, and I—I make peace because I am afraid to die!—This is too shameful for me If death can take Grandsire Bhishma, and Guru Drona, and you am I in any way different? No one is immortal The war will not end It will go on, it will go on because of you!" Duryodhana cast a flaming glance in my and Arjuna's direction And the next instant he was down on his knees and, taking Karna's massive arm in his hands, that redoubtable Kaurava leader broke into sobs even more pathetic than those of Chitrasena With his other arm Karna patted Duryodhana in an attempt to console him Now Karna had reached a point where he wanted to renounce every little bit of the world The loss of blood from his neck and his gums had begun seriously enfeebling him Ashvatthaman stepped forward and cradled his head lovingly in his lap The continuous blood-loss made him feel drowsy, his eyes heavy

I was wondering when Duryodhana would ask him his last wish But his grief had made him forget all about it Duryodhana's life was now like a chariot wheel without a hub Aimless

The hero of charities lay gasping His half-closed eyes began setting like the sun They merged with the sun His handsome body was slowly becoming still The coat of-mail on his massive trunk-like body moved in rhythm to his steadily declining breathing

It was my duty now to ask him his last wish Only *my* duty

I stepped forward I placed my mouth next to his sliced ears, and said softly, "Son of Kunti, your last wish"

He opened his drooping eyes with great effort. I could see tears in his eyes. Tears of what? Of sorrow? Of repentance? Ah, of thankfulness! Of gratitude! I, I myself, called him "Son of Kunti"—so the tears were perhaps thankfulness for being so recognised. He also replied feebly, "Lord of Dvarika... my last wish... is... is... that you... perform... my last samskaras... on... a plot... of barren land... Barren land!" His words trailed into inaudibility.

"Barren land! Meaning?" I could not follow what exactly he meant, so I asked.

"Yes, barren... That land... where... not even... a grass blade... grows... nor will ever grow... May my sorrows... never again take birth... in my form... in this mortal world... That is why... I want... my five elements... to merge... in this... barren land..."

His words were becoming almost inaudible. I too was astounded by the strange last wish of his. He was now babbling indistinctly. Wondering if he had still something to say, I took my ears close to his mouth. I listened intently. With singleminded concentration.

His words were unclear and incoherent. "Li... Di... Mata... Mata... na... na..."

No one could tell what he meant. Did he say "Vrishali" or "Draupadi"? Did he say "Kunti-Mata" or "Radha-Mata"? Did he say "Shon" or "Arjuna"? It was impossible to tell.

Then even the indistinct mumbling ceased. The blue pupils which were fixed on the sun stopped moving. I could tell, however, what he was saying, by observing the movements of his lips. They were the last words of the *arghya*-performing son of the Sun-God. The lip movements indicated that he was chanting the Gayatri mantra.

"Om *bhurbhuvah svaha, tatsavitur varenyam...* " And then suddenly, even the lip movements ended. All held their breaths. His breathing stopped completely. The coat-of-mail stopped heaving. A resplendent, all-bewildering, dazzling ray of light shot out instantaneously from the lotus of his heart and sped swiftly to the red orb of the sun moving slowly in the western horizon over the Amina Hill. The next moment the ray of light was absorbed in the Golden Womb of the Sun. The dazzling ray astounded all who stood there.

That mighty death-conqueror had finally achieved his Supreme Nirvana.

14

The instant Karna died, the setting Sun-God atop the Amina hill flared with a brief sudden splendour and, without the least delay, vanished beyond the horizon. The entire western region blurred. Gusts of wind edged shimmering dewdrops to the ground where they melted into nothingness. The four directions darkened. The earth became forlorn.

Ashvatthaman quickly stepped forward and smelt Karna's noble head. Duryodhana lifted Karna's hand and placed it on his own head. Chitrasena fell at Karna's clean, beautifully shaped feet.

Karna's shining atman returned to and mingled with the same resplendent eternal abode from where it came. Yet his body glowed with such intensity that it seemed to be alive. The crown that some time ago Karna had offered at my feet, I gently placed again on his curly golden hair.

The third commander of the Kauravas lay in eternal repose.

Ashvatthaman removed the *anjalika* arrow embedded in Karna's throat, and covered Karna's round Sun-like face with the white cloth which was permanently wrapped round his head.

Accompanied by the Pandavas, I walked towards the tent. The atmosphere was fearful, even gruesome. All were silent. In the far distance, a partridge kept up a shrieking ill-omened wail. Also far away, one could see a massive white horse, fatigued, sitting in the bog. A horse, alive, and sitting! I was surprised. I entered the tent of Arjuna with the Pandavas. I was quiet. Seeing the Queen Mother at the entrance, my face paled even more. Arjuna thought that she had heard of Karna's defeat and death and so had come running joyfully to the tent.

"Mother, your blessings." He stepped forward, bowing his head at her feet, and arrogantly asked for her blessings.

There was not enough light for him to notice that the end of the upper garment covered her face. Arjuna wasn't sensitive enough—and even if he did notice it now, what good was it?

Placing my hand on the Queen Mother's trembling back, I guided her into the inner room of the tent, and so averted a scene.

She, I, and the Pandavas were together only for a moment—and then the Pandavas went out to change their war-vesture. Only Kunti Devi and I remained in the tent, and then the disciplined restraint of that great lady shattered and she burst into sobs.

"Krishna... *Arre*, his last darshan..." The words choked in her sobbing throat. She could not even lift her face cupped in her hands.

"Brave mother, Queen Mother, control your grief. One has died; don't lose the five you still have. At midnight I will take you for his darshan. At least, let the secret remain for the time being a secret."

She wiped her eyes.

When that suffering heroic mother, who had passed through so many tragedies in so many forms, reached the corpse of Karna at midnight, she trembled like a red *indrayana* creeper in a buffeting storm. Her feet seemed to be rooted to the earth. I took her hand and pulled her to her dead son by the Sun-God. She did not have the courage to remove her shielding hands from her face.

I removed Ashvatthaman's covering cloth from Karna's face. Karna looked peaceful as if sleeping. His golden corpse gleamed even in the hazy light of the torches.

With the greatest of courageous effort she removed her hands from her face, and lifted her head; and the next moment she screamed.

"My son! My darling son!" She buckled and was about to fall. I steadied her. Who else was there now left except I to look after her?

15

The eighteenth day of battle ended. Bhima smashed Duryodhana's thigh, keeping his vow. The Pandavas' victory was undisputed. The long shadows of the evening of the nineteenth day slanted here and there on the battlefield. The field was chockful of the departed spirits of the slain. There wasn't four fingers of space on Amina hill without corpses. A white horse could be seen in the far distance, but sitting.

Curious, I walked towards the horse. I had been searching for Karna's corpse for a long time. As I reached the horse, I was surprised, shocked. My doubt was confirmed. It was Karna's horse, Vayujit, sitting beside the corpse of his master, fanning his master's face with his tail. It was too much for me. With tear-filled eyes I gazed at the mute beast. Even the littlest satisfaction of the Pandavas' victory faded. All that remained was astonishment, again and again, at the ways of nature.

Shifting the whip from my right to my left hand, I stepped forward The instant I lovingly patted the white horse, his body throbbed Whatever little experience I had as a charioteer had found its fulfilment I clucked "Tch-Tch", that high-pedigreed creature understood, and with all his strength dug his hooves in the earth and stood up I lifted his master's golden body and placed it on the horse's massive back His master's last ride had to be careful and comfortable, so Vayujit walked slowly We had to cross the Amina hill

On the way I picked up the burning torch from the tent of Acharya Kripa

I and Vayujit climbed the hill Exactly then the indistinct orb of the Sun Deity set in the horizon

On this peak of the hill the soil was black and strewn with rocks I had kept everything ready for the cremation A funeral pyre of sandalwood had been constructed on that barren stretch

I lifted dear Karna from Vayujit's glossy back and placed him on the pyre Torch in hand, I tried quickly to get a glimpse of his face With trembling hands I lit the pyre Swiftly, red and yellow tongues of flame leapt up to the sky Born of the essence of fire itself, that son of ether space lived through the fire of the earth, and in the end was intermingling with fire Right then Vayujit neighed and frisked and jumped I flung the torch into the pyre and approached Vayujit He too needed looking after I clucked to him, and stroked his mane His presence was pleasing to me also My mind was slowly becoming numb I gazed with unseeing eyes at the pyre, while I kept stroking his mane

Suddenly that white horse trembled and, ears cocked, turned his neck in the direction from where we had come A lady dressed in pure white was coming slowly towards us I shuddered It was Vrishali

Steady, unblinking eyes, wet dress clinging to her body she approached, step by slow step Like a daughter of the sky Her palms were joined Gazing neither left nor right, she went straight to the pyre, like a white stone statue walking She was not even aware that her shawl had slipped from her shoulder She passed by me, and stepped suddenly into the pyre I was dumbfounded

When the truth sank in, I silently felt for Vrishali With the whip handle I raised her upper garment to deposit it in the pyre Noticing a knot in the *anchal*, I withdrew the garment instead of consigning it to the flames

She was a sati who had entered the flames for the sake of an eternal union with her husband—what possible attachment could she have had? Puzzled, I opened the knot. A shard. A shard of a broken pot. I was bewildered.

I raised my hand to throw the shard into the flames. But I lowered my hand, because I wanted to retain the shard as a memory of Karna's last rites and Vrishali's life-dedication. I tied the shard in the end of my yellow robe.

With my whip on my shoulder, and holding Vayujit by his throat-lash, I turned back, and started descending the slope. The Pandavas, searching for me, had seen the pyre's flames and were running up the hill. I could see them clearly. Five torches were flickering; they were the torches of the Pandavas.

But they were late; far too late.

Writers Workshop

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